

Customer Service: How to Solve Problems

Introduction

One of the most fundamental jobs of any customer service employee is solving problems. Customers will come to you with a wide variety of problems, and you need to be able to offer them valid solutions.

Although some customers may be difficult to please, most of them aren't interested in stirring up trouble or making your job more stressful. They just want to find a solution to a problem whether it's a problem with your products/services or a problem they hope your products/services will correct.

This lesson will provide you some ideas about effective problem-solving in the customer service realm.

Possible Problem-Solving Outcomes

When you are problem-solving, it usually helps to realize that there is no one answer available. There are actually a number of possible outcomes, and your choices will determine which outcome becomes reality for you and your customer.

To illustrate these different outcomes, we'll use a scenario. We'll pretend that you are a customer service representative and a customer wants to return an article of clothing and get a cash refund but does not have the receipt. Here are some possible outcomes.

Win-Lose – In this outcome, you are the winner while the customer is the loser. You may explain to the customer about the exchange policy, and they may accept your decision. Your company wins because it doesn't lose the customer's business, but the customer loses.

Lose-Win – This outcome is the reverse of the one above. In this case, you are the loser while the customer is the winner. To avoid confrontation, you would go ahead and hand over the cash refund. Your business loses money while the customer wins.

Lose-Lose – With this outcome, neither of you win. You would refuse to give the refund, and the customer would refuse to ever do business with your store again.

No Deal – To achieve this outcome, both you and the customer have to agree that you can't agree on how to solve the problem. You may offer to make an exchange, for example, while the customer insists on getting a refund. If you don't call in extra bargaining assistance, this situation could become lose-lose quickly.

Win-Win – This is the ideal outcome in customer service because no one loses. You may explain to the customer that you can't offer a cash refund but that you can give them a store gift card for the appropriate amount. The customer is satisfied because he or she is getting what they want, and the store doesn't lose money or business.

Achieving Win-Win Outcomes

In the situation from the previous section, figuring out how to create a win-win outcome isn't too difficult. That won't be the case in every customer service situation, however. Sometimes finding the right solution is trickier, but there is a method you can use to start you on the right direction.

First, you have to determine what the customer needs or wants in the situation. That may be as simple as asking "What can I do to solve this problem for you?" Of course, some customers aren't as willing to tell you directly, so you may need to ask more open-ended questions to get a feel for the solution the customer is hoping to achieve.

The next step is to be empathetic with your customer. That means you have to view the problem from their angle. Sometimes that's easier to do than others, but by putting yourself in their shoes you'll gain a better understanding of how they feel and what you can do for them.

Now you can begin thinking through all of your options. Keep an open mind and don't immediately block any possibilities. Ideas that may not initially sound good can turn out to be the best ones. As you brainstorm alternatives, it may be a good idea to jot some down so you don't forget them.

Once you've got a few ideas to work with you can begin evaluating them in terms of their outcomes. Remember that you are looking for the one that will result in both you and the customer winning. That may require both parties to compromise.

Finally, give the customer multiple options whenever possible. When you provide alternatives and allow them to choose the one which will satisfy them, they are much more likely to come away with a feeling of victory and with a renewed respect for your company and how it deals with customer problems.

Lesson – Worksheet

Directions: Below are some questions related to what you just read. Read through them and think about how you would answer them. It may help you to write down your ideas so that you can come back to them later.

1. Some companies will do whatever it takes to correct customer's problem, even if it loses them money. While this would seem to be a lose-win outcome, most companies don't view it that way. Why do you think companies view these type of transactions as win-win situations? What do they have to gain?
2. We talked about the different problem-solving outcomes that are possible in situations, but what you may not realize is that your personality determines which of those outcomes you are most readily drawn to. For example, a competitive person may focus on win-lose outcomes because winning is more important than anything else while people who want to be liked by everyone may have a tendency towards lose-win. Think about how you've resolved problems in the past. Which outcomes do you seem most drawn to? What does that say about your personality?
3. Using the steps discussed in this lesson for creating a win-win outcome, brainstorm some ideas to present to the customer in the following scenario:

You are the manager of a movie theater. A mother comes to you after the conclusion of the movie she just watched with her three young children and complains because the kids missed the first ten minutes of the film due to long lines at the concession's counter and in the bathroom. She doesn't specify how she wants the problem to be solved, but she's visibly upset.