



Service Recovery: When Done Well, It Turns Dissatisfied Customers into Raving Fans

Description

Life doesn't always go perfectly. Neither does business. From time to time, mistakes will happen, and we will let customers down. And while service missteps are always upsetting (to the customer *and* the company), how we handle them makes all the difference.

Recently the Pensacola Blue Wahoos held a brunch event. Unfortunately, many things went wrong, and we received a lot of negative feedback. We knew that we had to own the situation so we came out with a statement about what had happened.

In our statement, we were very transparent about the negative results. We also laid out our plan to make it right. That seemed to make a real difference with people.

Done well, service recovery can shore up your brand and build trust with customers. They see that your service policy isn't just a bunch of words posted at the front of the store. It's a living, breathing process that all of the company's employees take seriously.

This is why it's important to train employees in service recovery. It's not easy to deal with an unhappy customer. Without training, employees may get upset and/or defensive. When you give them the right tools (especially key words to use at specific times), they'll be more likely to use them in tense interactions. These tools will keep them calm and focused.

A few things to keep in mind and share with your employees:

Learn to see customer complaints as gifts. I've always believed this, and it's especially true now. Many unhappy customers say nothing, leave, and never come back. When a customer does complain, it allows you to save the relationship (and usually make it even stronger) and fix the problem so it won't happen again. Narrate this to employees.

Let employees know that you can't please everyone, but it is the goal. Explain that a dissatisfied customer is an opportunity to create a raving fan. There is a thing called the service recovery paradox. This is where the customer thinks more highly of a company after the company has corrected a problem with their service, compared to how they would feel if the problem never happened. The mistake is almost never the problem. It's in the recovery, and if you can get that

right, you regain the confidence of the customer, and they feel valued and cared for. Here is a great example. Say your flight gets canceled. When you call the airline, they immediately apologize and offer a flight of your choice that same day, as well as a discount voucher for future travel. Of course you don't enjoy the inconvenience, but you can see they are trying hard to rectify things. In all likelihood, you are happier with the airline and more loyal than if there had not been a problem.

Allow the unpleasable customer to vent. Of course, this does not mean accepting abusive language, etc. However, allowing someone to vent is often the first step in moving the conversation toward a solution. When they are done, apologize for their displeasure with the company. The goal is to show you do care about how they feel and understand they are a customer.

Avoid we/theyism. The temptation may be to get the heat off yourself and blame someone else in the company. "Sorry, the people in that branch are always slow to respond. I'll handle it for you!" Never seek to look better at someone else's expense. The goal is always to function as a unified organization, not a divided one.

If you're a manager and you decide to deduct a meal, say something like this: *Your server shared the situation with me and recommended you not be charged for this. I agree 100 percent with the recommendation and offer my apologies also. I hope you will give us another try.* When the manager gives the win to the waitstaff, two key things happen. First, the waitstaff appreciates the manager. Second, the customer feels better about the staff person.

Put yourself in their shoes. You want people to show you respect and take your opinion seriously. Explain the *why* behind a policy they may not agree with. Offer to help them navigate the system if that will help resolve the issue. Don't hand them *off* to someone else; hand them *over*. This means staying with them until they get the best person to help them and then making the introduction. This can be done in person, over the phone, or by email. Each situation is different.

Don't focus on who is right or wrong. It doesn't matter if you think you're right. When a customer's perception is that they have been let down, they need you to acknowledge that and show empathy. I find most people are very forgiving when you say, "I am really sorry that happened." (Keep in mind that saying you're sorry doesn't mean admitting fault.)

Use very specific language. For example, "I understand it's your perception that we did not do a good job. What can we do right now to fix it?" Sometimes people are afraid to say this because they're afraid the customer will want something really big. Yet often this isn't the case at all.

If the customer wants something doable, provide it cheerfully. A loss of a few dollars can be much better than having someone out in the community and/or on social media causing image issues for the company. Follow-up with a thank-you note once you've corrected a problem.

If you can't give the customer what they want, at least be respectful to that person. Say, "Unfortunately, we can't work that out. I'm so sorry. Would _____ make you feel better?" (Here, offer up an alternate solution.) Sometimes employees like to rehash the incident and they may be negative about the person. Train them not to do that. It creates a culture where ALL customers aren't valued.

There are those times when all you can do is the best you can do. Spend the amount of time with the difficult customer that you feel is logical. Then move on. Don't let the difficult customer take up so much time that it creates more unhappy customers.

Even if you can't fix the problem for the customer, learn a lesson on how to prevent it next time. Sometimes complaints can unearth problems in your processes and procedures. Let the event cue you to take a hard look at what caused the issue and take steps to fix it.

Be sure to apologize to staff for having to deal with the situation if it's tough. It's really stressful for staff to deal with complaining customers. Acknowledge that and apologize for not getting out in front of it (if it was preventable). They will appreciate the acknowledgment, and it usually settles everyone down.

Click [here](#) to listen to a *Behind the Grind Show* podcast where I discuss service recovery.

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Author

quint-studer