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# *Customer Service Solutions*

## *Session 3*

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# Dealing Effectively with Complaints

## NOTES

Why is it important to handle customer (internal or external) complaints well?

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*"Train to use more than one weapon, then use the unexpected weapon."*

Dojo Wisdom

What happens when we handle them poorly?

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## The Problem

You are working at your desk when a call comes in from Chuck Murphy. He's requesting something you absolutely, positively cannot deliver. Your manager has already tactfully informed you how important good customer service is ("You have any more customer complaints and it's your head!"). So you tell Chuck that you'll get back to him. As you click down the receiver, your stomach starts devouring itself. You nervously suck on an antacid tablet as you contemplate your fate.

## "No!" – The Enemy of Satisfaction

Okay so your manager won't really hand you your head, but Chuck is going to be really unhappy. You're about to call him and tell him no, can't be done, sorry, not gonna happen – in short, prepare to be dissatisfied.

You'd rather suck eggs. Surely there is something else you can do.

Actually, maybe there is. In fact, its to this task we now turn. In today's session, we will explore several methods for avoiding the dreaded "n" word. We'll answer the following question:

**How can we satisfy, delight, and respond to customers, even when we simply can't do what they ask?**

*"Your opponent is your teacher."*

Dojo Wisdom

**What are the types of complaints you encounter?**

Think back to recent interactions with your customers. Jot down a brief description of a time you were not able to do what your customer asked. Or even better, come up with a problem that frequently keeps you from meeting customer demands. Just make a note of this; we'll come back to it later.

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**The Solution**

**It starts with attitude**

**Meet the Rejectionist**

If you are like the rest of us, you're tired of running into stone-faced receptionists who are, in truth, "rejectionists." You know the type. They see it as their job to fend off pesky customers and other offensive life forms. They sit smugly at their workstations, waiting for the chance to make our lives miserable, counting the minutes until they can tell us that we're wrong, we're late, or that they can't help us.

Rejectionists don't care an iota about satisfying customers. In fact, they don't simply fail to surprise and delight; they enjoy dispensing grief. They feel warm inside every time they are able to make us squirm. They don't just say no at the drop of a hat; they love saying it. In fact, they grin when they say it.

Are we being unfair? Absolutely not. We have all faced the wrath of petty bureaucrats whose mission in life is to nit-pick us until we hang our head in defeat. Not only do these people not belong in a service job, but they also don't belong in public. They should be wrapped in a blanket (straitjacket perhaps?) and carted off to therapy. And yet, there they sit at the counter—scowl at the ready and able to say no in seven languages.

Did we mention the hairy chin-mole?

### Meet Martha

At the other end of the customer service continuum (and three sigma's up the emotional health scale) we find Martha. Bring her a major task, and she's got the thing handled in less than a minute. She's a customer service wonder. One look at her as she throws herself into her job, and you can tell that she enjoys solving customer problems. She delights in finding ways to solve issues that others take one look at and sneer. She views problems as opportunities to kick her creative juices into full production.

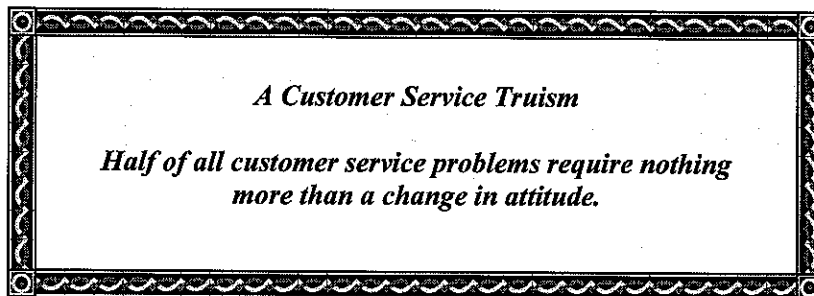
Sure, she has a zillion rules she has to follow and she has to collaborate with other agencies – something that would throw most of us into a catatonic state. But it's no big deal for Martha because she brings to work the one thing that nobody ever issued her. It's her attitude. She enjoys solving problems. She takes pleasure in finding ways to do what customers want – even when it's difficult. No, particularly when it is difficult.

Unfortunately, Martha's attitude cannot be manufactured. It probably can't even be taught. Before we can count on finding a Martha at every copy shop, parts department, hospital, and personnel office, we'll have to wait for cloning techniques to improve. In truth, if we could clone Martha, we could probably save the DMV.

### It's a matter of choice

Then again, we all have the potential to be Martha. It's a matter of choice. We can either choose to see customer problems as annoyances, barriers to our real jobs, insurmountable obstacles --- even excuses to make customers miserable – or we can see the problems as our cue to spring into action. The choice is ours.

**Question: Where do you fit on the continuum between Mole Man (the rejectionist you love to hate) and Martha?**



## The Skill

### It ends with know-how

It's time to look at the other half of service problems, the ones that call for skill. Let's assume that, like Martha, we have decided that it's positively peachy to work on customer problems. Unfortunately, we don't always know where to turn. Sometimes good will isn't enough. Sometimes the problem calls for substance over karma. It requires understanding our customers and working with our customers to resolve customer concerns.

## Understanding Customer Concerns

### Copy-Center Blues

Imagine that you are the designer of a customer service booklet. That means you write it, lay it out, select the artwork, and then take it to a copy center to be replicated. While you are imagining all this, pretend you have a large client who requests five hundred copies immediately — at the threat of pulling hundreds of thousands of dollars of business. “No problem,” you promise.

Then your computer crashes, your four-year old comes down with an ear infection, and you fall behind schedule. It turns out okay because you finish the original by ten-thirty the night before it is due, and luckily there is one shop in town that is open all night.

When you arrive at the center, the kid working the late shift says: “Don't know if I can get it done in time. Our machine's acting up, and I'm not feeling so good myself.” Sensing your panic, he throws you a bone with: “I'll give it a shot.”

So here is what your life comes down to: six years of college followed by ten years of keeping your nose clean — and your career hangs on the “maybe” of a kid whose role models are the members of *Smashing Pumpkins*. You do your best to explain the urgency of the situation but quickly realize there is no way to cover the generation gap. As you passionately explain that you will be in real trouble, you just know the kid is either thinking: “Bummer, you'll probably get grounded,” or “Like I give a flying leap about your personal life, dude.”

How did this happen? You muse to yourself. How can something this important hinge on the whims of a stranger — especially when the stakes are so high and there is so much uncertainty?

If this situation sounds the least bit familiar, then you know what it is like to be a customer in trouble. Maybe you've been there.

## NOTES

*“Never lose sight of the blade.”*

Dojo Wisdom

## Customer Anxiety

There are times when our customers confront problems that cause anxiety. In this context, anxiety is defined as any case in which our customers feel overly vulnerable, out of control, left in the dark, or highly agitated.

What makes anxiety-ridden situation particularly troublesome is they can happen at the drop of a hat. (Ever watched a customer go from calm to crazed in a split second?" It's not pretty.)

### Ingredients for High Anxiety

$$\text{Anxiety} = \text{Stakes} \times \text{Risk}$$

*Where:*

**Stakes** = The Consequences of Them Not Delivering

**Risk** = Vulnerability + Ambiguity + Uncertainty + Turbulence

## NOTES

*"Hope for nothing, fear for nothing."*

Dojo Wisdom

**The key of exceptional customer service is to reduce customer anxiety.**

Customer anxiety can be reduced in two steps:

1. Understanding the stakes
2. Reducing the risk

## Understanding How Private Sector Customers Think



**BUSINESS IS SOLVING PROBLEMS**

**SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSES ARE THE ONES THAT SOLVE THE PROBLEMS BEST**



**VALUE**

**VALUE IS NOT DETERMINED BY US, BUT BY THE CUSTOMER**

**WE CAN ONLY DETERMINE THE COST**

**Value  $\neq$  Cost of the job**

**Value  $=$  Implications of the solved problem**

*"If I am humble, I can never be overcome."*  
Dojo Wisdom

# Problems Our Customers Face

## NOTES

*"Strategy and tactics  
flow from your  
beliefs."*

Dojo Wisdom

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
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10. \_\_\_\_\_

### Customer Service Guideline #1

**Understand the stakes.  
Find out the consequences of not delivering.**



# Reduce the Risk

Once the stakes have been clarified, it is time to look at the other half of the formula — risk.

## Vulnerability

Nobody likes to feel helpless and out of control. Nevertheless, every time a customer gives us their plans to review, submits an application or waits for final inspection, the customer becomes dependent upon us and feels vulnerable. With every passing minute that we have their project in our hands, the customer's options diminish.

**Feeling vulnerable is inversely proportional  
to our customers' number of options.**

Therefore, as a provider it is our role to provide and explain multiple options. When the risk is bigger, the customer will expect more options. In most cases, providing "safety nets" is not difficult, and doing so greatly reduces customer anxiety.

### Customer Service Guideline #2

**Reduce nerve-racking vulnerability  
by providing and outlining multiple options.**

## Ambiguity

As a customer, when we turn a job over to a service provider, we like to know what is going to happen — step by step. In addition to satisfying curiosity, understanding the process helps the customer envision what is taking place, what resources will be deployed, and how many places the process can go wrong. A clearly explained process not only helps the customer assess risk, it insures they know their responsibilities in the process, and gives them an idea of who they should talk to if they have a question along the way.

### Customer Service Guideline #3

**If there is room for misinterpretation,  
clarify cost, timing, code details, policies and the process.**

## NOTES

*"Persist and you will  
find indomitable spirit."  
Dojo Wisdom*

## Uncertainty

Expressions such as “as soon as we can get to it,” “the fee is based on the size of the job,” “I’ll do the best I can,” or “we’ll get back to you,” are disturbingly vague. There is no telling what they actually mean — except more anxiety. When there is a chance that the customer may be unclear on cost, timing, code details, policies or the process explain each in detail. Use numbers, dates, standards and other concrete terms that help paint a clear picture.

### Customer Service Guideline #4

**Clarify your process. Explain each step.  
Where possible, make your process visible.**

*“Information is the oxygen of the modern age. It seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire, it wafts across the electrified borders.”*

Ronald Reagan

With all of this seeping and wafting going on, how come most of us have a hard time finding out how long an important job will take — or better yet, how close our work is to completion?

As the service provider, timing is an element that is largely under our control. We are the only one that can give people a fairly clear idea of how long their job will take. The same is true for job status. When customers ask where their job is in the cycle, we owe them an immediate explanation or at least an update, within twenty-four hours.

### Customer Service Guideline #5

**Provide an estimate for completion of your work and  
notify customers of changes in timeliness  
within twenty-four hours.**

## NOTES

*“Train because you are a warrior.”*

Dojo Wisdom

*"The centered Self reacts  
to few distractions."*

Dojo Wisdom

## **Turbulence**

Your customers know that you occasionally run into problems. That is a given. It is how you respond to the problem that matters. When turbulence hits, customers want you to do your best to overcome the challenges.

However, if you have to let them down, they want to know as soon as you know. Timing is everything. With proper notice, customers can make the necessary adjustments. The center of customer service hell is reserved for providers who run into a problem, keep it a secret, fail to deliver, and say nothing until the last minute — making it impossible to mitigate the impact.

### **Customer Service Guideline #6**

**If something comes up that will prevent you from delivering on time, let the customer know the moment you find out.**

## Solving Customer Problems

It turns out that people who take pleasure in solving problems not only maintain an upbeat attitude, but they also learn (and then put into practice) identifiable and transferable skills.

*"Keep your guard up  
and your elbows in."*

Dojo Wisdom

### The "EASE" Process

- Step 1: E-xplore and Understand the Problem**
- Actively Listen to the Customer to Understand the Issue and the Stakes
  - Restate Your Understanding of the Customers Problem and the Consequences
- Step 2: A-ssess Possible Solutions by Asking Questions**
- Question for Additional Details Needed to Formulate Possible Solutions
  - Identify the Solutions You Consider Possible
- Step 3: S-elect the Best Possible Solution**
- Gain Agreement on the Best Solution
    - Question for a Direct Commitment
    - Question for an Assumed Commitment
    - Give a Choice Between Two Alternatives
- Step 4: E-xecute the Decision**
- Explain What is Going to Happen
  - Follow Up

### More about steps 1 & 2

- Explore and Understand the Problem
- Assess Possible Solutions by Asking Questions

## NOTES

*"Know where your opponent will be when the strike lands."*

Dojo Wisdom

## Find out what the customer really wants

A customer walks up to your workstation and asks for something you cannot deliver or do. "I'd like an electronic copy of the organizational newsletter," she says. "Sorry, we don't have a copy," you respond. It's a simple encounter. You cannot help. She exits in a snit. Normally, that would be the end of the transaction.

But it doesn't have to be. What if she doesn't really need an electronic copy, but needs something else altogether? Then again, if she does, why wouldn't she be asking for something else altogether? Because she doesn't know what to ask for, that's why. It happens all the time.

"I don't have the latest newsletter. What do you need a copy for? You ask. "I'm trying to write a department newsletter, and I want to know how the thing is constructed." "If you're interested in the specs, we have a sample newsletter. It lays out fonts, margins, etc." Bingo. End of problem.

So here is the skill. **When you can't deliver on a request, find out what the customer really needs – not what he or she asked for.** As bad as it is to say no, it's a shame to say no to the wrong request.

## Help me help you...

The first step in knowing what the customer really wants is to ask detailed questions about the request itself. This is when the customer needs to be good at explaining what they want. Unfortunately, they may be both inarticulate and unwilling to take the time. To encourage customers, explain that you realize their time is valuable, and if they'd be willing to take a few minutes to clarify exactly what they need, it will improve their chances of getting what they want. Then as the customer talks:

1. Confirm key facts (restate your understanding)
2. Ask if you've got it right
3. If necessary, clarify misunderstandings

### More about steps 3 & 4

- Select the Best Possible Solution
- Execute the Decision

## NOTES

*"Finish the technique."*  
Dojo Wisdom

## Uncover what does the customer knows...

You don't want to waste time explaining what customers already obviously know. That is why it is important to uncover their existing knowledge level. To do so, simply ask them what they already know.

Test customers' awareness with two or three specific questions about the process you're explaining. Pay attention to the level of terminology the customer uses to respond. Can they converse comfortably about the main parts of the topic of discussion?

**Never assume that a customer knows what to ask for.**

## Make the connection

You are at the opto-mall-ogist getting your glasses readjusted when a customer walks up. "Do you carry disposable contacts?" she asks. The technician looks up and says, "Nope. Don't carry 'em" and turns back to your frames. "Do you know someone who does?" the customer continues. "Yeah, at the other end of the mall," the technician barks. As the lady leaves, the technician mutters, "If I had a nickel for every time I get asked that question..."

You're thinking to yourself, "That could have gone better." And it could have.

When you cannot deliver on a request, don't simply brush off the customer, and never be smug, curt, or snippy. Direct customers to another department, a higher authority, or even another business.

## Never use a policy as a club

Next, we enter the very center of customer service hell. It's the place where policies are more-or-less randomly created and then defended as if they were holy writ. You know what we are talking about. Nothing frustrates customers more than having someone quote them an obscure sub-clause of some irrelevant policy. Consider the following example.

You've hauled your mountain bike to the shop that normally fixes it for you (the one that gladly accepted your annual training fee). "Can't get to it for four days," says the technician. "Okay, I'll come back in four days." "But you can't leave it here." "Why not?" "It's against policy."

"Well, if it's against policy, I guess I will just throw the heavy, awkward, metal, pointy thing on the leather seats of my brand new car – marring and punching holes in my 'Fine Corinthian' – and drive the thirty miles home, only to return in four days. Heaven knows I would never question a policy."

Or maybe not. Maybe we want to know why the shop has the stupid policy. Maybe we want an exception to the policy. Maybe we want to grab the guy's collar and .... But we digress.

## There is a better way. It involves two steps.

### 1. Hard or Soft Rule?

First when someone requests something against policy, look at the reasons behind the rule. Is it relevant? Is the policy still current? Obviously, some policies shouldn't be questioned – but other rules are a lot "softer." Many are merely guidelines aimed at preserving order. If a policy can be sidestepped without causing negative repercussions, why not make an exception and surprise and delight your customer?

### 2. Can you make the call?

Hold a second. What if you don't have the authority to circumvent policy? All of us fantasize about ignoring inconvenient and annoying rules. Unfortunately, personal convenience may not be enough to warrant a deviation. It could easily be a cop-out. It could also get us into serious trouble. But we're not talking about personal convenience here; we're talking about pleasing a customer, shoring up loyalty and encouraging future good relations. If we are determined that an exception to policy wouldn't throw the planets out of orbit (and could save us a valued customer), and we are not at liberty to make the call, we should take the matter to our immediate supervisor. Often, someone who is one link above you on the chain of command can okay an exception.

## NOTES

*"Someone else's win is  
not always your loss."*

Dojo Wisdom

## Be tenaciously creative

More often than not, people ask for the right thing, and you don't have a policy problem. But sometimes it seems you still cannot do what the customer needs. Here's where creativity comes into play. You may need to come up with an "out-of-the-box" solution.

*"The sound of your shout gives you power."*

Dojo Wisdom

**Never be guilty of "poli-cide," or using a policy to kill a customer relationship.**

## Work on the system

In some cases, you may find yourself consistently unable to meet a customer request. When you are repeatedly hitting the same snag, it's a good indicator that a system problem is preventing you from delivering something that could really please customers (and bolster public image). So what do you do when you can't meet a request because something in your process or system is inadequate?

Since customer service barriers stem from definable causes, the skill to finding a long-term solution involves conducting a root-cause analysis – question the process. It may take some dedication and mental gymnastics to unearth the root of your problem, but this is the only way to remedy the situation. Here's the process:

1. **Identify the problem.**
2. **List at all the possible causes of the problem.**
3. **List all of the possible solutions.**
4. **Identify the best possible solution.**

Then what? Sometimes, we need to do even more. We come up with ideas, but nothing seems to happen. This calls for both creativity and tenacity. We can't let new barriers prevent us from bringing the problem to its knees. Depending on the nature of the problem, there are times when we'll need to seek outside help. We may need training, additional materials, or even more hands. Eventually, we may need to craft a proposal to help leaders see the need for a well thought-out creative solution.



## When a Customer Makes a Mistake

Finally, take a look at a special case. A customer does something really stupid – so stupid that it takes tremendous self-discipline not to mercilessly make fun of him or her. Or maybe a customer acts irresponsibly, and now he or she wants you to jump through hoops in order to save his or her neck. This, of course, is enough to drive anyone crazy. If you don't become angry, you are tempted to act huffy and superior.

Both responses, no matter how vindicated they make you feel, won't work – particularly if you want to avoid paying out large cash settlements. Besides, nobody ever deserves to be humiliated.

*"Revel in your awkwardness as much as in your mastery."*

Dojo Wisdom

### When a customer makes a mistake:

- **Take responsibility for your part of the problem**
- **Do not dwell on the mistake**
- **Focus on the corrective action**
- **Always maintain respect**

# The Customer Who Does Not Complain

A customer who is dissatisfied may not say a word even though his other body language is screaming volumes. Be on the lookout for these visual signs. They are good indicators that a customer is unhappy with your service.

## Loss of Eye Contact

*If a customer averts his or her eyes and will not meet your gaze, he or she may have written you off.*

## Tone of Voice Change

*An angry voice is an obvious clue. A more subtle signal might be abrupt or hurried responses to you.*

## Uncomfortable Body Movements

*If your customer keeps shifting his weight or crossing and uncrossing arms, it could be a sign of irritation.*

## NOTES

*"Know the vital points,  
strike to the vital points."  
Dojo Wisdom*

# Encouraging Complaints

## NOTES

*"Strike through the target."*

Dojo Wisdom

**Customers may not complain because:**

**I can "encourage" customers to share their complaints in a constructive way by:**