

“10 Tips for Handling Irate Callers”

By Mike Aoki www.reflectivekeynotes.com

“Customers don’t call with compliments, they call with complaints.” I learned that lesson the hard way as a brand new CSR at the phone company, nearly 20 years ago. Out of 50,000 calls, only 3 people called to thank us for their phone service; 49,997 people called with complaints.

That’s the purpose of a customer service call centre: to help your clients solve a problem. However, before you can help your clients with a problem, you first have to deal with their anger.



Most customers call with complaints, not compliments

Here are 10 customer service tips for dealing with irate callers:

1) Stay calm and try not to take it personally:

- **When a client is upset, their emotions can become contagious.** Remember, your client is upset about their situation. They are not upset about you.
- **Acknowledge the client's right to be upset:** “I’d be upset too, if that happened to me.”
- **Breathe deeply, unclench your muscles and focus on the client's needs** rather than your own reactions.

2) Let the client vent, without interrupting:

- If you interrupt the client, they will become angrier.
- Instead, **let the client vent until they start to slow down.** Listen empathetically to their issues without interrupting: “Tell me what happened next.”
- Continue to **acknowledge their concerns.**

3) Acknowledge the client's emotions and apologize, if appropriate:

- **Once a client's feelings are acknowledged,** they will usually become calmer and more open to solutions.
- If appropriate, apologize. This does not necessarily mean you agree with the client's position. It means **you emphasize with how the client is feeling.**
- Some **possible phrases include,** “I’m sorry to hear you're going through this” or “Many people would feel the same, if it happened to them.”

(continued on the next page)

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(continued from previous page)

4) Help the client focus on their current needs:

- Clients may ramble when they are upset. **They may even continue to argue with you, after you've agreed with them.** When someone is upset, their bodies are flooded with adrenaline and they can no longer tell what's on topic, or off.
- Talk slowly. **Calmly ask questions to re-direct the conversation back on track.**
- **Check for understanding** at each step: “If I understand you correctly, you plugged in our product and but it didn't power on.”

5) Give the client control over their level of disclosure by asking permission to ask questions:

Some clients may feel threatened when you ask them for additional information.

- **Ask permission to ask questions about sensitive topics.** For example, “To help you, would you mind if I ask you a few questions? Some of them may seem very personal, so if you're not comfortable with a question, please let me know.”

6) Avoid jargon:

- **When people are upset, they may react angrily to jargon or unfamiliar words.**
- Avoid the use of jargon, unless you are sure the client will understand it.
- Keep your phrases short and simple. **Don't use company acronyms unless you think the client will understand them.**

7) Keep it simple:

- When people are upset, they lose the ability to take in new information.
- **Give only one instruction at a time.** Walk the client through the process step-by-step. **Repeat directions frequently.**
- **Confirm any key client information** by repeating back to them any key phone numbers or appointment information.

8) Seek a full resolution, if you can:

- **Offer a solution and then ask a “confirmation question”** such as, “How well that does work for you?” By asking, “How WELL does that work for you”, you are focusing your client's mind on the benefits of your solution.
- If the client agrees, proceed with your solution. **If they disagree, ask additional probing questions so you can find a better solution.**

(continued on the next page)

“10 Tips for Handling Irate Callers”

(continued from previous page)

9) Offer a partial resolution, when appropriate:

Sometimes, you may be unable to fulfill a customer's entire request. But, you can still offer a partial solution.

- **Offer to help with part of the task:** "While it takes a week to repair your original item, we can offer you a loaner item you can use."
- **Offer an alternative time:** "While we can't have it delivered overnight, we can have it sent to you within three days."
- **Offer an alternative resource:** "If you need the item immediately, we also have a store located on 123 Main Street, in your city where you can pick it up."

10) Agree to disagree, if you must:

- **Myth: "All conflict can be resolved."** There are some customer service conflicts which should NOT be resolved. For instance, if a client asks for something that is illegal, or violates safety regulations, you need to refuse their request. You may also have to refuse their request due to company policies.
- In situations like this, **explain why you are unable to fulfill their request.** People don't want to hear, "It our policy..." They want to be treated as intelligent adults and told the reason "why" their request can't be satisfied.

Use these 10 tips to help your Agents and Supervisors deal with irate callers and escalations .

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About the Author:

Mike Aoki is the President of Reflective Keynotes Inc., a Toronto based call centre consulting firm. His training workshops help companies improve their sales and customer service results.

His past clients include Telus Mobility, Rogers Wireless and the Canadian Cancer Society. He has also been the keynote speaker for organizations such as the Business Development Bank of Canada and the Canadian Institute of Management.

For FREE tips on how to improve your call centre's sales, customer service and management skills, visit: www.reflectivekeynotes.com

You can also have one of Mike Aoki's call centre workshops customized for your organization and held at your location. For more details, visit:

http://www.reflectivekeynotes.com/call_centre_training.htm