Customer Abuse

There was a time when giving excellent customer service meant doing the best job you could for a customer. Now, thanks to corporate greed and the drive to maximize profits, customer service has become employees being subjected to all types of verbal abuse, and at times physical violence having things thrown at them and even hit, all so that the corporate office can secure one more sale.

One of the major policies you will need to develop for your business is what, if any, customer abuse you will permit in your business. The cost to your business can be great. Staff morale decreases lowering productivity. Staff turnover increases costly money to hire and train new employees. Moreover, a single customer making a scene can have a detrimental impact on other customers witnessing such behavior. The question is whether you are more concerned with satisfying that one abusive customer at the risk of driving away several other well-behaved customers.

There’s no excuse for any type of physical or verbal abuse that customers direct to staff. You need to develop policies that address how employees, management, and ultimately you will handle such events. Aside from the financial impact abusive customers can have on the business, abusive customers can open the business up to litigation. Employees can sue you for allowing a hostile work environment or for subjecting them to the psychological trauma of a threatening situation.

Policies and training are necessary so employees are equipped to diffuse a situation with minimum stress. However, employees also need to know when to assert themselves and establish boundaries and when to get management involved. Employees need to have appropriate support from senior management. Employees who feel that they aren’t being safeguarded from customer abuse, and are suffering from stress, are protected by the relevant OSHA regulations as well as federal and state statutes.

Employers who don’t take customer abuse of their employees seriously, and have the right procedures in place, are opening themselves up to serious litigation for sick leave, stress disorders, PTSD, and prosecution in some cases for failing to ensure that they have provided a safe work environment.

Suggestions to build a policy and training program:

* Consult with employees and identify risks that can lead to customer bullying and determine what can be done to prevent or overcome these situations
* Develop an effective policy and procedure to deal with customer complaints and abusive situations (i.e. pass situation along to manager and have communication channels through which a complaint can be properly heard and dealt with)
* Communicate the policy to all employees, with regular training and induction training for new staff
* Conduct separate training for supervisors and managers and ensure that senior managers are available on the floor to handle situations
* Ensure that there appropriate number of staff to handle customer volume
* Ensure there are feedback channels open, available and known to customers
* Provide appropriate support and counseling for staff members that have experienced customer bullying
* Keep accurate records of steps taken to assist if legal action commences

10 Ways To Address Abusive Customers:

1. Always maintain a polite and professional manner during any exchange with a customer. If you are sworn at or exposed to personal attacks on your character, resist the urge to retaliate with abuse or use phrases like "potty mouth" or "didn't your parents teach you any manners."
2. Ask the abusive customer to calm down in a respectful manner and explain that you're there to help. Tell them it's going to be more difficult to resolve the issue while tempers are flared and that you're more likely to be able to address any concerns if any discussion is conducted in a civilized fashion.
3. Tell your abusive customer that you can understand their frustration and that you would be upset if you were in their position -- if they have a valid complaint. If you feel that their complaint is spurious, empathy will not be necessary.
4. Be honest about what you can do. If you're unsure about how to deal with the complaint, don't try to bluff your way through the situation. This will only serve to enrage your customer further and could end up getting you into trouble further down the line, either with your boss or legally. Explain that you're unsure of how to deal with the situation and find out from your superiors, colleagues or a lawyer where you stand.
5. If a customer is complaining about an issue that's covered in any contract you have with them, respectfully refer the customer to the clause that supports your position. Then, politely explain that it was their responsibility to review the terms and conditions of your relationship before entering into any agreement.
6. If it becomes clear that you are unable to deal with an abusive customer effectively, don't be afraid of passing the problem on to your manager or a colleague who is more experienced at negotiating with angry clients.
7. If your customer repeatedly uses foul language and/or threatens you, advise them that you do not have to, nor will you, tolerate being spoken to in such a manner. Explain again that you are there to help, but warn them that you will terminate the call if you're on the phone or call security or the police if you're discussing the situation in person.
8. Don't try to talk over or interrupt your abusive customer when they are in mid-flow. This is only likely to make the customer angrier. Let them finish what they are saying. If this involves a long, drawn-out rant, so be it. Remain silent for a few seconds after they have run out of things to say and then state your position. If the customer interrupts, tell them that you have listened carefully and would be grateful if they could extend you the same courtesy.
9. If the discussion is going nowhere, state your position firmly but politely and advise your customer to make a complaint to any trade body or ombudsman who regulates your industry if she won't accept your decision.
10. If all else fails and you're unable to get through to your abusive customer, end the discussion. If you're on the phone, explain politely that you feel you can go no further with the conversation and that you're going to hang up. If you're dealing with the customer face to face, ask them to leave your premises.

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| **Customer Abuse** |
| **Form Of Abuse** | **Action To Take** |
| * Yelling, raised voice
 | * Verbalize you understand the customer is frustrated, but yelling will not help you solve the problem.
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| * Verbal abuse, name calling
 | * Verbalize you understand the customer is frustrated, but it is not appropriate for him/her to call you names.
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| * Racial or bigoted language
 | * Inform the customer that language will not be tolerated, and they will no longer be served, and instruct them to leave.
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| * Threatening gestures
 | * Ask the customer to stop the threatening gesture. If they continue, inform them that you will not continue to help them if they continue the gesture. If it occurs a third time, stop providing help and instruct them to leave.
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| * Throwing objects
 | * Inform the customer that behavior is not acceptable , they will no longer be helped, and instruct them to leave.
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| * Physical assault
 | * Run away; sequester yourself to a locked room if possible. If no other choice, fight back. As soon as possible call the police and inform the supervisor.
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