

# BEST PRACTICES *in* Customer Service

Sharing Successful Customer Service Solutions

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## Trainer's Corner *by Doug Lipp*

### Dealing With the Challenging Customer: How Empathetic Are Your Reps?



Does the following sound familiar?

**Customer:** "I'm so frustrated with this mess I could scream. You keep sending people out here to fix this problem, but they never get it right. I've got better things to do than baby-sit your incompetent technicians."

**CS Rep:** "We're working on the problem as fast as we can. What can I help you with now?"

One of the most challenging areas of customer service is listening effectively with empathy. This is especially difficult when interacting with a customer who is frustrated or upset. Faced with an agitated customer, it is all too easy for the service provider to fall back to a pattern of responses such as: "That's the policy... If you would just calm down... The only thing I can do is... Let me get my supervisor."

None of these responses address the emotional state of the customer. Let's take a look at a response to the same situation handled with more empathy:

**CS Rep:** "I know you've got better things to do with your time than wait for our technicians to arrive. I apologize for the inconvenience."

**Notice the difference?**

Listening with empathy does not mean that the rep agrees with the customer's complaint or that the rep is about to "give in." They should think of it as an approach to help calm down the customer and keep their own emotions in control. In this example, the customer's initial reaction to the rep's response may be:

**Customer:** "You're darn right I have better things to do!"  
At which point the rep should again respond empathetically:

**CS Rep:** "I know exactly what you're going through. The last thing you need is to have us keep interrupting your work schedule. What can I do to help?"

Allowing the customer to first fully vent, the rep can effectively transition the focus of the conversation to problem solving.

*Here is a simple skill-building activity that will help your customer service representatives develop a more active empathetic listening style:*

Divide your team into small groups of three. Have one

rep act as a customer, another as a CS representative and the last as the process observer. Have the "customer" present a one-sentence complaint to the CS rep similar to the preceding example. Encourage use of typical scenarios your company faces.

Next, have the CS rep answer with empathy. Empathetic responses usually contain reflective words that tell the listener you are truly listening to the essence of their complaint. Some simple examples are:

Customer:	CS Rep:
1) "This has taken forever."	1) "I know, you've been very patient."
2) "Who has the answers around here?"	2) "Being sent from one person to the next is very frustrating, how can I help?"
3) "You obviously don't want my business."	3) "It sounds like we've really dropped the ball."
4) "Because of your shoddy service, I am taking severe heat from my boss."	4) "You need a team that can provide reliable service. We're obviously losing your trust."

After the first round of ~e exercise, have the group analyze the rep's response to the "customer's" complaint. Discuss alternative responses~ then rotate roles until each person has had a turn as the representative. Empathetic responses alone will not fix a customer's situation. Combined with active problem-solving strategies, however, your team will find them very effective.

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