

## Contents:

[Home](#)  
[Vendors](#)  
[Articles](#)  
[Subscribe](#)  
[Advertise](#)  
[News](#)  
[Resources](#)  
[Search](#)  
[About Us](#)

## Services:

[Jobs Board](#)  
[Blog and News](#)  
[eNewsletter](#)

## Quick Links:

[Events Calendar](#)  
[Area Code Info](#)  
[Editorial Calendar](#)  
[Call Center Glossary](#)  
[White Papers](#)  
[Submit Content](#)  
[Our Sponsors](#)

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[Answering Services](#)  
[Triage Call Centers](#)  
[Appointment Setting](#)  
[Physician Referral](#)  
[Other Services](#)  
[Signup to be listed](#)

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## How to Handle Irate Callers

By John Tschohl

June/July 2013

No matter how good you are at what you do, what business you are in, or where it is located, you will at some point find yourself facing an irate caller, but perhaps no more so than in a call center. Maybe the product was flawed, a delivery was late, or a charge was inaccurate. How you deal with that customer not only will determine how he or she feels about your organization but how you feel about yourself.

When you are able to turn an irate caller into a satisfied customer, you will gain confidence in your ability to diffuse a volatile situation and evoke a positive outcome. You'll also gain the respect of your coworkers and attract the attention of your supervisors. Who knows? It might earn you a promotion.

When most people encounter an irate caller, their first instinct is to turn and run. Dealing with a customer who has a problem and is upset about it can be more than a little daunting. With the proper perspective, however, you will see that the customer's complaint is actually an opportunity for you and your organization to put your best foot forward.

Customers who have complaints are a blessing in disguise. They let you know where you and your organization have flaws – and provide you with the opportunity to correct them. When you do, you will realize increased customer loyalty, revenues, and profits. It's a win-win situation.

You should be more concerned with the customers who don't complain than with those who do. A study of retail banks in the United Kingdom, conducted by J.D. Power and Associates, showed that 25 percent of customers who experienced a problem in the past twelve months say they definitely or probably will switch institutions in the next year. In addition, 55 percent of customers who have had a problem or complaint were disappointed with the resolution process.

The study also found that, while incentives are important in attracting new customers, customer service is essential to retaining them. Almost 40 percent of customers left their banks because of a poor service experience, and an additional 43 percent cited poor service as a top reason for intending to leave their banks.

Customer service is key to the success of any organization. Dealing with irate callers and solving their problems is a critical element of that service. When dealing with an irate caller, take these steps:

- Listen carefully and with interest to what the customer is telling you.
- Apologize without laying blame, regardless of who is at fault.
- Put yourself in the customer's place, and respond in a way that shows you care about his or her concerns. Use phrases such as "I understand that must be upsetting," or "I don't blame you for being upset. I would feel the same way."
- Ask pertinent questions in a caring, concerned manner and actively listen to the answers.
- Suggest one or more alternatives that would address the customer's concerns.
- Solve the problem quickly and efficiently or find someone who can.

Using these steps will quickly calm most unhappy or angry customers and allow you to address and solve their problems. Patience and tact are critical. Even if a customer is making outrageous statements and, in essence, throwing a fit, it is important that you remain calm. Do not take those statements personally. Apologize, take the blame, and empathize with the customer – then solve the problem.

Just as important as what you should do, there are some things you should not do:

- Don't directly challenge someone who has a complaint and is angry. Even if that customer is wrong, don't attempt to prove it. Your goal is to solve the problem, not to enter into a debate on the merits of the complaint.
- Don't let the conversation wander or get off the topic. Solve the crisis at hand without looking for – and finding – additional problems.
- Don't participate in faultfinding. Shifting blame doesn't help anyone.
- Don't let your personal feelings get in the way. Stay cool and use courtesy and tact to diffuse the situation.

When you successfully handle irate callers and their complaints, you will gain a satisfied customer – a customer who will be loyal to you and your organization. That loyalty will have a positive impact on your organization's bottom line – and make you look like a hero.

*John Tschohl, the internationally recognized service strategist, is founder and president of the Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Described by USA Today, Time, and Entrepreneur as a "customer service guru," he has written several books on customer service and has developed more than 26 customer-service training programs that have been distributed throughout the world. John's strategic newsletter is available online.*

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