

Keeping Comebacks From Not Coming Back

New or good customers deserve some hand-holding.

My in-laws unexpectedly dropped in from out-of-town one day. I took them to our favorite Italian restaurant for dinner. When our orders came, my father-in-law's meal was missing. I flagged our waitress, Veronica, and told her.

"It's probably coming up," she said and walked away.

Then, I noticed I hadn't gotten my side order. So I flagged Veronica again. She still wasn't apologetic but she was confused.

"Hmm. I'll check on that," she said turning.

"Oh, can you check on our bread, too?" my wife chimed in.

Veronica turned on her heels and sighed "Didn't you get bread with your salads?" she inquired.

"No," Beth replied. "That's why I'm asking."

Attitude is Everything

It may not have been Veronica's fault that the kitchen fouled up. But her response definitely impacted her tip — and our loyalty to the restaurant. The same is true for the impact of how you and your store deal with mistakes.

Mistakes happen. It's a fact of business. I strongly recommend that you have systems in place to prevent mishaps. It's equally important to have a system in place for turning comebacks into happy repeat customers. Having a system teaches all your employees a uniform method of dealing with comeback situations and avoids "seat-of-your-pants" solutions that could come back to bite you in the "seat-of-your-pants."

I don't think Veronica ever said "sorry." Some people think the word "sorry" is a

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sign of weakness or an admission of guilt. It's neither. It's a sign that you care about your customer. That one word can make all the difference in diffusing a customer's reaction — or overreaction as the case may be. Start with "I'm sorry."

But don't stop with "sorry." One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to just give your customer lip service. That's why I call my system "More Than LIP Service." It consists of 3 simple steps: Listening, Investigating, and Pampering.

Listening

Be sure you listen to a complaining customer. For every customer that complains to you, two are complaining behind your back to other prospective customers. At least this customer is giving you a chance to make good on your mistake.



If at all possible make the first employee the customer talks to the last person he needs to talk to. Avoid bouncing him around so he has to keep repeating his story. If the first employee doesn't have the authority to make a decision, then the second person should. Period. Don't waste their time or yours. No one likes chasing around.

And don't hope the problem will go away. The only way a problem goes away is if the customer takes it — and his future sales — with him.

Listen completely. Avoid ignoring or cutting off your customer. Pay attention. It's hard to resist tuning out a person who's ranting and raving. On the other hand, sometimes it's hard to realize how upset a low-key person is when he doesn't seem outwardly emotional. In either case, allow him to vent his feelings. It gives him a sense that he's been heard — and it can help diffuse any anger.

Listen empathetically. When you sympathize with someone, you feel sorry for him. Your customer doesn't want pity. When you empathize with someone, you identify with how he feels. Everyone can identify with getting a bad product or experiencing bad service. Be honest and let him know you've been there, too.

Maintain eye contact. Nod in agreement as she speaks — if appropriate. And tell her you know how they feel: "I understand you're very upset about your graphics peeling off. I would feel the same way."

Listen openly. Resist the urge to make a decision before you hear all the details. As much as possible don't place blame, just take responsibility for making the situation right.

Investigate: Get to the Bottom of the Problem.

Once he's done talking, it's your turn. Play detective and ask good questions. Here's a few answers to get to help you decide how to solve the problem:

What's really wrong? Sometime the stated problem isn't the real problem. If possible, walk to the customer's car with her and look at the problem. Is the trim really cracked, or just loose?

Sometimes an explanation is incomplete: "My mirror's broke." What's "broke" mean? Cracked? Broken off? Not adjustable? Ask for details.

You want to get the most specific explanation so you understand the problem. If the customer says the mirror doesn't adjust, you may simply need to show him how it works rather than replace it.

Why did this go wrong? You need to know why the problem occurred to avoid repeating it.

You may have to ask some questions to see if the customer contributed to the problem. Try not to ask accusingly. Instead of "Did you wash your car with Kersosene?" try "What did you use to clean your car?"

If the problem is your fault, the customer doesn't need a long explanation. Saying "I'm sorry. Looks like a bad batch of striping. We can replace it," can be enough.

What does the customer want? Just ask. You'll be surprised. Most customers want less than you'd think. Most customers will settle for a make good. "Just fix it." is the most common response. If it's your fault, fix it.

What if they want their money back? Be ready to give it to them. But first, ask them about the value of what you did right, then, ask them what they feel is "fair". After considering it, many people settle for a fraction back. Some settle for nothing. A few will still want their money back. You need to decide how to deal with it.

If you're dealing with a good or new customer, I'd give him his money back. If this is a repeat incident, I suggest giving in-store credit in the form of a gift card or gift certificate — this may help reduce chances of being taken advantage of.

Pamper: Make the customer feel special.

As I've said before, we've all experienced bad service or got a bad product. Depending on how we were treated (and our history with the company) we'll either return or never go back. Your customers are no different.

Treat your comeback customer as special and you may keep her. Go the extra mile. Don't just make good on your mistake, make up for it. Give them a free car wash, key chain, or license plate frame. Try to make the value of the gift proportional to the value of the mistake. But it's probably better to give the \$1,000 comeback nothing rather than a "fresh pines" air freshener. That's almost insulting.

Once he's left your shop you have the chance to really get your comeback to keep coming back. Send her a thank you note for giving you the chance to fix her problem and put in a coupon good on her next purchase. Sign the card and drop it in the mail. If writing the customer doesn't fit your style, just give her the coupon before she leaves. Odds are she'll be back within a few weeks — if not days. And you've just built loyalty over a situation that could have destroyed it.

A Happy Ending

We went back to our favorite Italian restaurant the other day. After dinner, I was going to talk to the manager about the service last time. But then I noticed Veronica was missing. And the food was great, so why spoil a nice evening? Not everyone is so forgiving.

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