



# ***CHAPTER 5: HANDLING DIFFICULT CUSTOMER SITUATIONS***

A Guide to Customer Service Skills for the Service Desk Professional

Third Edition

# OBJECTIVES

- The power of a positive attitude
- Why customers sometimes behave in challenging ways
- Proven techniques to handle irate, difficult, and demanding customers
- How to respond, not react, to difficult customer situations
- Positive steps to stay calm and in control

# ***HANDLING DIFFICULT CUSTOMER SITUATIONS***

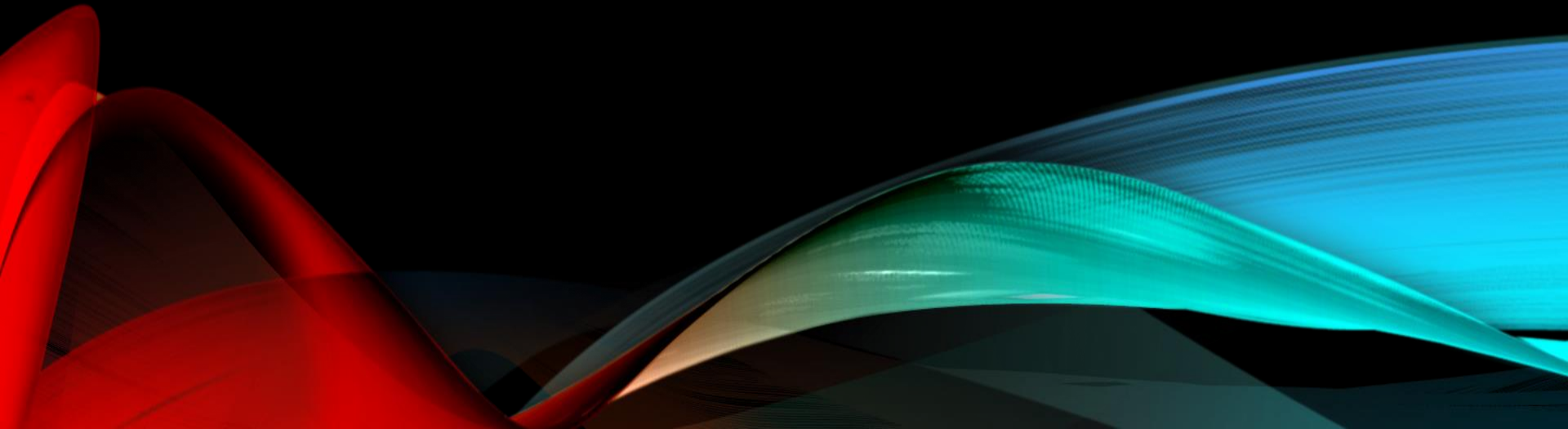
- Most customers are pleasant, calm, and appreciative of analysts' efforts
- There are times when customers become upset, angry, and demanding
- These difficult situations can be extremely stressful
- You cannot control your customers' behavior
- You can control your response to their behavior
- You can develop the skills needed to handle even the most difficult situations

# **TOPIC 1: THE POWER OF A POSITIVE ATTITUDE**



***"THINGS TURN OUT BEST TO  
PEOPLE THAT MAKE THE BEST OF  
THE WAY THINGS TURN OUT."***

**- John Wooden**



# ***HANDLING UPSET, ANGRY, & DEMANDING CUSTOMERS***

- We all have bad days
- Most customers who contact the service desk are reasonable, pleasant, and grateful for your help
- Difficult customer situations are the exception, not the rule
- Difficult situations can affect your attitude and your interactions with customers
- Try to consider and treat each customer and each situation as unique

# UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR

PART 1 OF 3

- **Empathy** – The act of identifying with and understanding another person's situation, feelings, and motives
- Being empathetic does not mean you are responsible
- It is your responsibility to acknowledge that the customer is upset and do everything you can to help
- The frustration a customer experiences dealing with a technical problem may be compounded when he or she tries to obtain support
- Your company or department may be responsible for situations that cause frustration or confusion

# UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR

## PART 2 OF 3

- Broken promises
- Long wait times
- Confusing telephone menus
- Confusing user instructions or online help
- Unmet expectations
- Having to call or e-mail back repeatedly
- Having to repeat details previously provided
- Looming deadlines
- Negative phrases
- Poor product quality
- Rude analysts
- Being placed on hold without being asked
- Being placed on hold for an extended period of time
- Web sites that are difficult to navigate, inaccurate, or incomplete
- Web sites that fail to offer alternate ways to obtain support

# UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR

PART 3 OF 3

- Remember that there is always something that you can do
- Communicate each and every customer complaint to management
- Give your customers the benefit of the doubt; they may just be having a bad day
- Be honest and don't blame customers for your lack of patience or negative attitude
  - *Maybe you are the one having a bad day!*
- Strive to be positive and professional at all times



# WINNING OVER DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

PART 1 OF 9

- Working with difficult customers requires patience and composure
- How you respond to difficult customers, particularly during the early moments of your conversation, will greatly influence their perception and willingness to work with you
- You can make a difficult situation worse by failing to:
  - *Listen*
  - *Empathize with the customer's situation*
  - *Communicate with positive statements*

# WINNING OVER DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

PART 4 OF 9

## **Step 1. Get Focused:**

- Take a deep breath. Put a smile on your face. Sit or stand up straight. Get your notepad ready.

## **Step 2. Let the Customer Vent:**

- An upset or angry customer has a story to tell
- You must let the customer tell that story from beginning to end
- Until each point is made, the customer cannot calm down
- Listen actively and look for cues that the customer is ready for you to begin taking control

## **Step 3. Listen Actively:**

- Resist the temptation to ask questions
- Nod your head or use encouraging verbal phrases
  - “Uh-huh.”
  - “Go on.”
  - “I see.”
  - “I understand.”
- Listen carefully for the central theme of the person’s incident or complaint
- Take notes and be prepared to restate what you have heard

## **Step 4. Acknowledge the Customer's Emotional State:**

- A customer needs to feel that you care and that you fully understand the situation
- Acknowledge the customer's emotion
  - Even if you don't understand why the customer has that emotion
- Empathize or at least accept that this customer may be having a really bad day and needs your help
- Respectfully use the customer's name and communicate your desire to do all you can
- Sincerely apologize if your company has caused any inconvenience

## **Step 4. Acknowledge the Customer's Emotional State (continued):**

- “Miss Navarro, I’m sorry our field service engineer did not arrive at the time promised. Let me find out what happened. Would you like to hold while I contact his office, or would you like me to call you back?”
- “Mr. Sheng, I understand that you are very upset. I will do everything I can to get this printer problem resolved right away.”



## **Step 5. Restate the Situation and Gain Agreement:**

- You must gain agreement that you fully understand the situation and the customer's expectation about when a solution will be delivered
- Restate the problem
  - Use the customer's exact words when possible
- Use a verifying statement
  - "Is that correct?"
- Ask for clarification when you do not understand
  - "I'm sorry, I'm confused. Could you repeat..."

## **Step 6. Begin Active Problem Solving:**

- If steps 1 through 5 were followed, the customer should have calmed down
- Begin diagnosing the incident and developing an action plan
- Stay focused!
- If necessary, repeat some or all of these steps for handling a difficult situation

# CALMING IRATE CUSTOMERS

PART 1 OF 5

- Customers do not start out irate
  - *They're typically just frustrated or confused*
- In most cases, anger can be avoided
  - *Use the technique for handling difficult situations*
  - *Properly handle situations such as placing customer on hold and transferring customers*
- People experience varying degrees of anger
- Initially, a customer describes the inconvenience of the incident or situation
  - *"I've had to wait 20 minutes to get through. Why can't you people learn to pick up the telephone?"*

- To calm the customer and gain his or her confidence:
  - Acknowledge the customer's frustration
  - State that you will do all you can
  - "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. How can I help you?"
- If you fail to acknowledge the customer's emotion, the customer may become angry
  - He or she perceives you do not understand or that you are not listening
  - "You're not listening. Let me say it again."

- If you are listening, you have not *communicated* that you are listening
- You may have acknowledged what the customer said, but not how the customer said it
- The customer is either going to give you one more chance or he is going to ask to speak with someone else
- Make sure you understand how to engage help if you need it



## *Technique for handling offensive or abusive language*

1. Let the customer know you want to help.  
"I am sorry there has been a problem. I will do everything I can to assist you."
2. If after venting the customer continues to use offensive language, ask the customer to speak in a professional manner.  
"I'm trying to assist you. Could you speak in a professional manner?"
3. If the customer continues to use offensive language, let the customer know you are going to take action if the language persists.  
"I appreciate your frustration [anger, concern] and I'm trying to assist you. If you cannot speak in a professional manner I will have to transfer you to my supervisor."
4. If the customer cannot speak in a professional manner, take action.  
"As you are unable to speak in a professional manner, please hold while I transfer you to my supervisor."

- Some customers will become irate even if you have done your best
  - *They may have unrealistic expectations*
  - *They may be trying to manipulate you*
  - *They may be under so much stress that they are incapable of calming down*
- Ensure that your actions do not drive customers to their irate state
- Understand that customers may be responding to your behavior, or what they perceive is your behavior, when they become increasingly angry
- Keep it positive and focus on what you can do

# REPAIRING A DAMAGED CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP

PART 1 OF 3

- Dissatisfied customers will continue doing business with a company if their incidents and complaints are consistently handled quickly and cheerfully
- Never assume that just because a customer seems happy when you complete a contact that you have regained that customer's trust
- Patience and consistent follow-through are required to repair a damaged relationship

# REPAIRING A DAMAGED CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP

PART 2 OF 3

- **Follow-through** – The act of keeping your promises, including getting back to the customer when you said you would—even if you don't have a resolution to the incident
- **Follow-up** – The act of having a service desk or company representative verify that the customer's incident has been resolved to the customer's satisfaction and that the incident has not recurred



# REPAIRING A DAMAGED CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP

PART 3 OF 3

- While uncomfortable, following up is the only way to repair a damaged relationship
- It enables you and the customer to feel comfortable when working together in the future
- When situations are handled properly, even the most disgruntled customer can become the service desk's greatest advocate



## **TOPIC 2: KEEPING YOURSELF IN CONTROL**

# KEEPING YOURSELF IN CONTROL

***Be prepared for difficult situations!***

- Learn to respond, not react
- Stay calm under pressure
- Get ready for your next contact

# LEARNING TO RESPOND, NOT REACT

- Reacting is easy
  - Without thinking you say or do the first thing that comes to mind
- Responding involves making a conscious choice to control your behavior
- As a professional, it is your responsibility to act in a positive, constructive way, regardless of the customer's behavior
- Try to think rationally about what the customer needs and respond calmly to that need

# STAYING CALM UNDER PRESSURE

PART 1 OF X

- People experience stress and pressure differently
- Learning to stay calm under pressure requires that you learn to control *your* behavior
- As a human being, you can “lose your mind” on any given day
- This is because different sides of our brain handle logic and emotion

# STAYING CALM UNDER PRESSURE

PART 2 OF X

- The two sides of our brain work together
- In most people, one side dominates the other
- Avoid the temptation to focus only on problem solving (left brain) when someone is in an emotional state (right brain)

**LEFT BRAIN**  
Memorized data  
Linear thinking  
Logical thinking

**RIGHT BRAIN**  
Emotion Versatility  
Creativity Sense  
of humor





# STAYING CALM UNDER PRESSURE

PART 3 OF X

- Determining the dominant side of your brain may be helpful
- “Left-brained” people tend to be logical thinkers and may have a difficult time understanding why other people become emotional
  - *Left-brained thinkers must learn to listen for and acknowledge emotion*
- “Right-brained” people may become emotional fairly quickly in a difficult situation
  - *Right-brained thinkers must learn to control their own emotions*

# STAYING CALM UNDER PRESSURE

PART 4 OF X

- Remain calm and in control at all times
  - If you become upset or angry, neither you nor the customer is going to be able to bring the situation under control or solve the problem
  - Learn the symptoms that you experience when you are getting upset or angry
- Clenched jaw
  - Concentration loss
  - Grinding teeth
  - Headache
  - Nausea
  - Neck and shoulder tension
  - Rapid heart rate
  - Reddening face
  - Shallow breathing
  - Strained tone of voice
  - Sweating

## *Use calming techniques to stay focused*

- *Take a deep breath*
- *Sip water*
- *Use positive imagery*
- *Use positive self-talk*

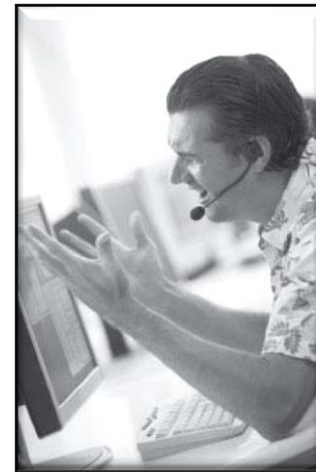
- Take a deep breath to:
  - *Lessen tension*
  - *Resume a normal breathing rate*
- Sip water to:
  - *Lubricate your throat*
  - *Help restore your voice to its normal pitch*

# STAYING CALM UNDER PRESSURE

PART 7 OF X

## *Use positive imagery to:*

- *Influence your thinking in a positive way*
- *Envision yourself standing next to the customer, looking at the incident*





- Use positive self-talk to:
  - *Eliminate negative thoughts and attitudes by using positive words*
  - *"I know what to do."*
- Practice makes these calming techniques a habit
  - *Role play with another analyst*
  - *Record and listen to your calls*
  - *Listen to other analyst's calls*
  - *Review difficult calls in staff meetings*
- Customers respond positively to analysts who are calm, confident, and in control

# GETTING READY FOR YOUR NEXT CONTACT

PART 1 OF 2

- Some difficult situations are more draining than others
- Factors that influence your ability to recover from a difficult situation include:
  - *What time of day the situation occurs*
  - *Your level of preparedness*
  - *Your personal mood*
- Take the time you need to compose yourself before handling your next contact
- Give yourself the opportunity to let your positive, can do attitude shine through

# GETTING READY FOR YOUR NEXT CONTACT

PART 2 OF 2

## Techniques for recovering from a particularly upsetting situation

- Inform your team leader or supervisor
- Take a short break
- Avoid caffeine or other stimulants
- Employ stress-coping mechanisms

# **TOPIC 3:** **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

- Most customers are pleasant, calm, and appreciative of your efforts
- Difficult customer situations are the exception, not the rule
- Difficult customer situations can be extremely stressful and can affect your attitude—if you let them



- Proven techniques enable you to understand, acknowledge, and address the emotional needs of customers as well as their technical needs
- Consistent follow-through and follow-up enable you to maintain your customer's goodwill and repair a damaged relationship
- When difficult situations are handled properly, even the most disgruntled customer can become the service desk's greatest advocate

- It is important to be prepared for difficult situations
- By thinking rationally and staying calm at all times, you can learn to respond, not react, to difficult situations
- Learn the symptoms that you experience when you are under pressure
- Use calming techniques to relieve these symptoms so you can focus on meeting your customer's needs
- Take the time to compose yourself before you handle a new contact

- Each and every difficult situation you handle will increase your confidence and your ability to handle future situations
- In time, you will find these situations less stressful because you have the skills needed to calm yourself and your customer and to stay in control at all times
- Practice the techniques discussed in this chapter so you can handle difficult situations with confidence