

TECH TIP # 33



One of a series of dealer contractor technical advisories prepared by HARDI wholesalers as a customer service.

CUSTOMER RELATIONS FOR THE SERVICE TECHNICIAN

In addition to repairing equipment, service personnel very often are required to repair the broken relationship between the customer and the company. While it's not possible to make a human relations expert out of every service person, here are a few thoughts on handling customer complaints.

Customers have a right to expect you to *listen* to their complaints. They usually believe their problem is unique and they desire satisfaction --- from you!

Every service person can expect to run into complaints -- it's a guaranteed fact of servicing. It's how you handle the problem that can convert a complaint into an asset.

Complaints can take any of a number of forms ---- "Your company doesn't keep its promises" is a common one. "Your service is terrible." "The *darn* thing does not work right....! And many more.

Depending on a service person's ability to handle complaints, they can be shattering, frustrating, costly experiences --- or positively priceless opportunities to sew up a customer's allegiance and business.

HANDLING THE PROBLEM

People who have learned to turn complaints to their advantage say it can usually be done in one or all of four areas. These are the service person's:

- Attitude and approach.
- Capacity for "discovering the villain."
- Ability to find solutions.
- Knack for cashing in on complaints.

TAKE THE COMPLAINT SERIOUSLY

Attitude and Approach: The real service person sees a complaint for what it really is, a chance to be of service to a customer when that service is most wanted, a golden opportunity to prove to a customer that his problem is the service person's problem.

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But you can't expect a customer to believe you care unless you show him that you do. This means, first of all, "Taking the complaint seriously."

Whether your customer thinks you're giving him the evil eye or grumbles about defective merchandise is immaterial. The point is, as far as he's concerned, he has a legitimate beef. Minimize his problem *in any way* and you immediately compound his grievance because you are, in effect, challenging his judgment.

DISPLAY CONCERN

Besides, a man with a gripe is in no mood to be reasonable. Not at first, anyway. Above all, he craves an audience, someone to whom he can pour out his tale of woe. Therefore, the smart employee gets to his customer at once.

Once there, listen, look interested, and display concern. Get all the facts. Don't speak until you're certain that he has nothing more to say. A talked out customer is the easiest to deal with.

Then summarize, in your own words, his net valid complaint. This serves two purposes: it disarms the complainer by showing him how closely you have followed what he's been saying. And it helps you keep his points straight in your own mind. Next to letting off steam, what the disgruntled customer wants most is satisfaction.

If his complaint is justified, be quick to admit it --- but be sure to explain why things went wrong and why a recurrence is all but impossible. Otherwise, your assurance that "it won't happen again" may sound like a hollow promise.

One training director has found the phrase, "Now that we know ..." followed by a specific remedy for the complaint, a most valuable goodwill winner. In his own words: "A customer who raises cain frequently feels a little sheepish after wading into you. "Now that we know..." helps him save face. It's a way of thanking him for pointing out an error or shortcoming. At the same time, it's a promise that any future complaints will receive the same prompt attention. For a short phrase, it does a whale of a job."

CEMENT RELATIONSHIP

Summing up, one wholesaler advises: "Welcome complaints as voluntary tip-offs to what you can do to cement relations with your customers. It's the man with the *silently nursed dissatisfaction* who should worry you, for you'll **never** know you can be of maximum service to him. The most skillful doctor in the world can't treat a patient who refuses to say where it hurts."

Discovering the Villain: The biggest mistake an employee can make in handling a complaint is to pin the blame on someone in the front office. Avoid that approach like the plague.

Passing the buck can only arouse suspicion, as if you were saying, "It's not my fault, but I'll help you anyway." Rather than dig up excuses, ask your customer, "What happened?" That way, you boil the whole issue down to what went wrong rather than who is to blame.

Ally yourself with him in a search for the common enemy -- the cause of his complaint. When you find it, get rid of it.

Sometimes the grievance is based on error. When that's the case, a calm review of the circumstances may divulge the reason for the complaint.

When facing a complaint, consider these possibilities, as they could save a lot of sound and fury:

Improper use of product or service --- Even the simplest gadget in the world that is used incorrectly won't operate effectively or measure up to the claims of the manufacturer. How often has a heating and air conditioning customer complained about the equipment failing to provide the temperatures promised, yet the trouble has been found to be dirty air filters that has not been changed?

Here is an opportunity to change a complaint into a sale --- the sale of an annual maintenance contract. Be sure to check on your customer's handling of your product or service. Often the basis for the complaint could be simple misuse.

Improper diagnosis --- Sometimes a customer gets worked up over frequent safety trip-outs. When the service person arrives, they can find no malfunction to cause the safety trip-out, until finally a temporary low voltage condition is found.

Always check for an outside factor over which you have no control. It may be well be the cause of the complaint. Find it if you can -- and make a friend.

Misunderstanding --- Many complaints are based on lack of information. The customer whose free service period has lapsed or who misreads your company's guarantee bases his complaint on a different frame of reference from you.

Such "emotional static" can lead to a verbal free-for-all. A few well-placed questions and some patient answers can clear the air.

But suppose the customer's complaint is justified? What then?

Then it will be up to you to find solutions that are mutually acceptable to the customer and your company.

The main reason for investigating a complaint is to undo some kind of damage --- to profits, products or peace of mind. However, this is easier said than done.

The first step in finding a mutually acceptable solution is for the service person to familiarize themselves with their company's facilities and adjustment policies. Precisely what guarantees does it offer? Who is responsible for installation, maintenance, billing? How soon can parts be replaced? And how far does his authority go to make adjustments?

The answers to such questions will automatically set limits to the kind of redress that can be offered a customer. But the result will be proposals that can be lived up to.

When it is known what can be done for a dissatisfied customer, tell him --- precisely, correctly, and honestly. If an immediate answer cannot be given, tell him it will be taken up with your superior, and that he will have the answer within a few days. Whenever possible, give him just a little more than he expects or demands by way of allowance or replacement.

The second step toward finding mutually acceptable solutions is to ask the customer, after telling him what will be done to rectify the error, "Is that acceptable to you?" Encourage his comments on the justice of the solution, for such encouragement pays a double dividend. It indicates confidence in the fairness of the proposal and it proves that the company's only interest is his total satisfaction.

If you, your company or merchandise are at fault, settle the complaint on the spot.

People are *generally* reasonable. What they want --- and have a right to expect --- is fair play. Erase the cause of a complaint and in nine cases out of ten, you will hear no more about it.

WHEN YOU MUST SAY "NO"

Not every complaint can always be adjusted to the customer's complete satisfaction. When he wants more than you can give him, try this four step approach:

- Carefully explain why you cannot do what he asks.
- If possible, draw a parallel with his own line of business.
- Be firm but always pleasant.
- Stress the benefits of your products and services.

All meaningful or legitimate complaints should be reported back to your superiors and kept on file. The frequency of a specific complaint might suggest a weakness in a product or installation. Feedback in the form of a complaint can therefore lead to improved equipment, training or company procedures.

Finally, many times complaints or problems arise because the customer has not been properly educated as to the operation and care of the system or unit. Never place the blame on the customer for the improper care or operation of equipment. It is the *responsibility* to provide good instructions. The Consumer Product Safety Commission has stated "They (Manufacturers, wholesalers and dealers) must be in a position to advise the buyer competently on how to use and how to maintain and repair the product (sold)."

Be certain equipment is properly and complete instructions are provided the customer.