6 Steps to Dealing with a Difficult Caller in the Call Center

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Dealing with an angry caller is never an easy task. Unfortunately, call center customer service representatives have to do it all the time. While the stress and anxiety of handling these situations fade as reps learn the ropes, the importance of handling difficult customers well never fades.

A dissatisfied customer is likely to tell between nine and 15 people about their experience, whereas a satisfied customer may only tell between four and six. That means that, unfortunately, when it comes to customer support, bad news travels faster than good. Thus, ensuring that each caller hangs up happy is of utmost importance. Here are some simple steps to make the process of turning a tough caller into a satisfied customer:

1. Work as quickly as possible

As they say, time is money. The more efficient you can be means the more customers you can help throughout the day. Most, in fact 90 percent, of consumers would rather deal with issues over the phone than via chat, email or social media.

That usually means that on any given day, you could have a lot of customers on hold. You need to get to all of them as fast as you can. Not only that, but customers get frustrated when they have to wait. Many are already frustrated by the time they arrive at the other end of your line. Adding excessive hold times to the process will only exasperate the initial problem.

Even for those who are calling to place an order, it's just as important to help them place it as quickly as they can. If an online shopper doesn't feel their concern or question is addressed in a fast enough manner, 45 percent of the time, they'll abandon the purchase altogether, losing the company cash and a potential loyal customer.

Call center managers can help their agents become more efficient by providing them with intuitive and easy-to-use cloud-based call center software that frees up time with automated workflows and helps them improve on their KPIs.
2. Listen to the entire story first

When you do get a difficult caller on the phone, ask the customer how you can help them. Then, sit back and listen, really listen. **When a customer is explaining a problem, don’t interrupt them at all.** Don’t cut them off. Don’t even cut in to ask for clarification. As they talk, have a pen and paper or computer tab handy. This way, you can jot down any details and potential questions you’d like to ask for clarification reasons after they’re finished.

Not only will listening to the whole story first give you a better idea of the issue or question they’re calling about, but it will also help the customer feel better. There are few things more frustrating to an angry caller than not being heard. Let them talk while you actively listen and take notes.

3. Apologize

After they’ve explained the problem, before anything else happens, apologize. This is key, especially if the customer is angry. Even if he or she is as cool as a clam, it is still worth your time to apologize for any problem or inconvenience. If the problem was originally their fault, blaming them is only going to worsen their mood, so give a sincere apology, not a generic one. That way, they’ll feel like they have an ally, not an enemy. Assure him or her that you’re going to assist them and together you will work to solve the issue at hand.

4. Make sure you understand

Now that you’ve apologized, it’s time to look again at those notes you were taking. Knowing and understanding the details before you begin to try to solve the issue will almost always actually save time down the road. Plus, it will let the caller know that you hear them, are actively thinking about their problem and are doing what you can to assist them.

5. Try to solve the issue

If you know the solution, fantastic! Dive right in. If you’re unsure, don’t make any promises that you can’t keep. “I’d love to help you with this issue” isn’t quite the same as saying, “I’ll send you a new one by tomorrow” if it can’t be done.

If you don’t know the answer, put the caller on hold and consult your manual or other resources as quickly as possible. Remember, an angry caller is only going to get more annoyed the longer he or she sits on hold. If you can’t resolve the issue quickly, you’ll need to ask a coworker or manager for help.

If you actually need to transfer the caller to another department or manager, let them know first rather than just pushing a button and sending them along. Many
annoyed customers are hesitant to be transferred because they fear their call will be dropped, they’ll be placed on hold again or they may be annoyed that they have to explain their issue again.

One way some companies handle this is by having the first customer service rep actively call and then introduce the customer to the second service rep. This warm transfer gives the worker a chance to efficiently explain the problem and it doesn’t leave the angry caller hanging.

6. Compensate the customer for their trouble

If you have a particularly difficult caller on the phone, you may have to give them particularly special treatment. Not all companies are able to offer discounts or freebies to disgruntled customers, but many do. If you have a problematic customer who refuses to relax, you may have to throw them a freebie as a last resort.

This is sure to calm them down because everyone loves free stuff. Even though it may seem like a loss of money upfront, paying to keep a customer loyal will likely pay for itself in the long run by cutting back on marketing costs. A new customer costs six or seven times more to market to than a returning one. Plus, it’ll save on the bottom line. Increasing customer retention by just two percent decreases overall costs by an average of 10 percent.

Above all, staying friendly, keeping your cool and moving things along as efficiently as possible are the three main components of satisfying even the grumpiest of customers. Stay sympathetic and positive and always apologize for their inconvenience. Take a deep breath and, most importantly of all, be as helpful as possible but never take an angry caller personally. The majority of the time, it's not you. It's them.

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8 Stress Management Techniques for Call Center Agents

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Stress within the call center is not only widespread, but costly. Stress causes half of all absenteeism and one-fourth of all voluntary turnover within call centers (Mattenson and Ivancevich, 1987). With an average turnover rate of approximately 40% and a cost of turnover at around $10,000 per agent (James, 1998) call centers that don’t address workplace stress can be setting themselves up for failure.

This blog post provides eight simple stress management techniques for call center agents. Whether you’re a call center executive determined to decrease call center agent burnout, a call center manager striving to reduce agent attrition or a call center agent searching for ways to increase your performance, this is a great place to start.

Before discussing the specific techniques, it is important to state how these techniques impact the body. Stress management techniques help to:

- Decrease heart rate
- Lower blood pressure
- Slow breathing
- Reduce the activity of stress hormones
- Increase blood flow
- Reduce muscle tension
- Strengthen the immune system

Taken together, these physiological benefits have an impact on the call center agent’s performance, productivity and effectiveness. Specifically, engaging in stress management techniques improve:

- Focus and concentration
- Productivity
- Mood
- Memory
- Energy
- Frustration tolerance

Thus, call center agents that can effectively manage their stress will be more satisfied with their work, more effective at handling calls and more productive. It is therefore imperative that call center agents are trained in stress management techniques and encouraged to practice them daily.

The following are the top eight stress management techniques that call center agents can engage in at the workplace.

1. 4×4 breathing

4×4 breathing is a simple and effective deep breathing technique that helps to counter the effects of stress. "Deep breathing works by slowing the heart rate and lowering blood pressure," says psychologist Judith Tutin. It is something that call center agents can do every day to help buffer themselves from the detrimental impact of stress and help lower their physiological arousal after a particularly tough call.

Take a few minutes throughout your day to practice 4×4 breathing. First close your eyes and sit up straight with your feet on the floor. Inhale through your nose for four seconds, hold your breath for four seconds, exhale out your mouth for four seconds and wait for four seconds. Then repeat this four times. 4×4 breathing is a simple technique that you can use at any time throughout the day and will have a huge impact on your ability to effectively manage stress.

2. Engage your five senses

As a call center agent, it can be easy to perseverate on that one call that went horribly wrong or to worry about what your boss might say in your meeting later in the day. Thinking about the past or worrying about the future can significantly increase stress. Combat this by focusing on the present.

Take a small break, walk outside and engage your five senses. Notice any sounds like the buzz or traffic, birds chirping or trucks driving by. Take your shoes off and walk in the grass. Try to notice any smells. Study a leaf or a tree as if you were looking at it for the first time. Notice how the sun feels on your skin and the breeze on your face. Notice the taste a piece of candy or some coffee. When you spend time in the moment focusing on your five senses, you'll end up feeling less tense and ready to rock!
3. Get social

As a call center agent, sometimes the last thing you want to do is talk more than you have to. However, this can be a fatal mistake when it comes to managing stress. After a tough call, go talk it out with some friendly colleagues. Most likely, just discussing it is cathartic enough that you’ll feel better. But sometimes your colleagues will take it to the next level and help give you a new perspective on the issue (e.g., “That guy called last week about the same issue”), much needed support (e.g., “Wow that guy was an A-hole. I bet you were mad!”), or reassurance (e.g., “I had a similar call and our manager said it was fine”). This peer support can go a long way to decreasing your experiencing of stress and will help you put that tough call behind you.

4. Get icy

If you are really stressed out or angry, there is an incredibly effective technique to calm you down immediately. Placing your head in ice cold water (making sure the water hits your face just below the eyes and above the cheekbones), putting an ice cold gel mask on your face, or running ice cold water on your wrists activates the parasympathetic nervous system which functions to calm us down. Eminent psychologist Dr. Marsha Linehan explained that this technique works best if you hold your breath and bend over for 30 seconds as it activates the mammalian dive reflex that relaxes your body. Regardless of which technique you use, putting something cold on yourself can be an effective technique to use when you notice that your emotions are getting the best of you.

5. Laugh it out

Laughing is a natural way to lower the stress hormone cortisol and increase endorphins which improves your mood. When you need a good pick me up, put on your favorite funny YouTube videos, look at a funny quote, or read some funny jokes. Just a few seconds can have a huge impact on your experience of stress.

6. Spotify to the rescue!

Listening to soothing music can lower blood pressure, reduce your heart rate and decrease anxiety. While you are performing after call work or during your break time turn on some classical music to reduce your experience of stress. A little relaxation can go a long way.

7. Run (or stretch) it out

Exercise is another quick fix to increase blood flow and oxygen to your brain which decreases your experience of stress. You can go for a quick walk around the block at lunch, go up and down a few flights of stairs on break, or stretch it out with head rolls and shoulder shrugs at your desk. All can be a quick way to help you reduce the amount of stress you experience at work.
8. Be grateful

When you feel stress getting the best of you, shift your focus onto things that make you happy. Take a minute to write out a list of some of the things you are grateful for and make sure you include things about your job. Maybe you are grateful that you can save the money to pay for your son’s college, or perhaps you are grateful for your supportive colleagues, or maybe you’re grateful to work from home on occasion. Whatever it is, take some time to write it down and reflect on it. That cognitive shift may be all it takes to get you back to your A-game!

Call center agents have a stressful job. But they don’t have to let stress impact their performance. By employing the right strategies, call center agents can effectively manage their experience of stress at the call center. Many of the aforementioned eight techniques don’t take a lot of time or effort but can have a huge impact on performance. Try them out and see how you can benefit!

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