

How to Keep Your Cool in Angry Times

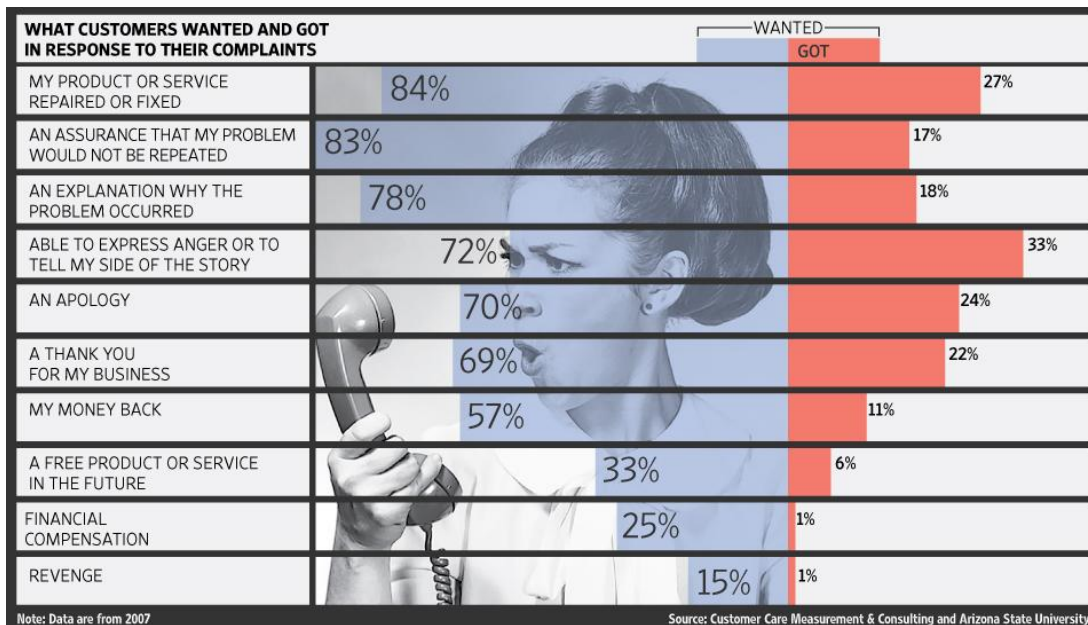
By SUE SHELLNBARGER

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The caller was enraged long before Beverly Smith was asked to pick up the phone. He had already yelled at her boss for an hour.

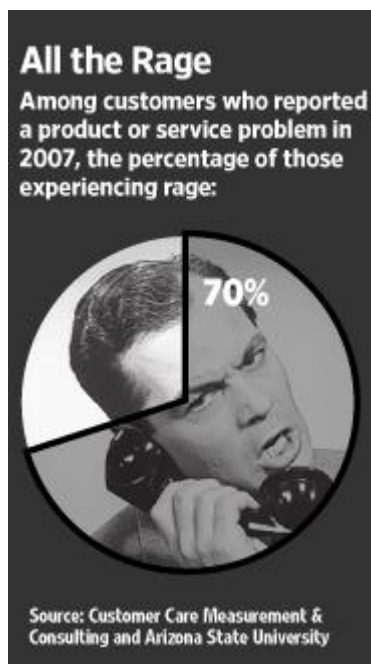
But staying calm in the face of other people's anger is routine business for Ms. Smith, who takes outpatient calls at a San Francisco medical center. Refusing to take the caller's rage personally, she put a smile on her face and listened with empathy as the ailing retiree ranted for 45 minutes. When he calmed down, she promised to help, sorted out his demands and got him a referral he needed. By the time Ms. Smith was finished, the man was asking to send her flowers.

WHAT CUSTOMERS WANTED AND GOT IN RESPONSE TO THEIR COMPLAINTS



These are angry times, from irate political protests to slapfests on reality shows, not to mention Burger King's Angry Whopper. The millions of people who work in customer-service and public-service jobs face this rising tide of rage every day. That puts them on the front lines of Americans' anger—and makes them a rich resource. Many of them have developed a variety of skills for staying calm and keeping on-the-job frustrations from spilling over into their home lives. Their tips can be useful for anyone trying to defuse tension on the job or at home.

'Emotional Leadership'



A key task, when dealing with another person's anger, is to show "emotional leadership" in responding—that is, to keep from getting mad too, says Donna Earl, San Francisco, owner of an eponymous customer-service training and management company.

First, workers should acknowledge the customer's emotions, listen with warmth and empathy, and apologize, even though they didn't create the problem, saying things like, "We're sorry this happened," she says. When the caller calms down, they focus on problem-solving and promise confidently to try to help, she says.

When you're the target of rage or criticism, controlling your own emotions is one of the hardest tasks. Techniques Ms. Earl recommends include looking at the ceiling to relax your breathing and tracing figure-eights in the air with your eyes, which relaxes and refocuses the eye muscles, with a calming effect.

To stay calm, one San Jose, Calif., help-desk worker posts a vacation photo of his family at his desk, directly in front of him at eye level, Ms. Earl says. One technique she doesn't recommend: Some agents hit the "mute" button and scream back.

Customer-service work is increasingly trying. Research shows 70% of customers who have problems with a product or service are in a rage by the time they talk with customer-service workers; 24% yell, 8% threaten to sue, and 5% start cursing, says a 2007 survey of 1,004 consumers by Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, Alexandria, Va. Customer rage has likely risen since then, as financial strain makes people "more on edge, critical and less tolerant," says Mary Jo Bitner, a marketing professor at Arizona State University's Center for Services Leadership and a researcher on the survey.

In three separate incidents this year, customers have assaulted fast-food restaurant employees, pounding them with their fists or heaving a bucket of mop water over the counter. One Ohio woman climbed through a restaurant's drive-through window, then smashed it, after an employee refused to serve her lunch during the breakfast hour.

Call-center workers say people these days are far quicker to get upset over small purchases than they were a few years ago. "People feel so out of control on a macro level" that they fly into a rage when a smaller thing goes wrong, says Liz Ahearn of Radclyffe Partners, Bloomington, N.J., a call-center consulting and training company. Some insiders call such customers "hot reactors."

Building a Relationship

Some customer-service workers take satisfaction in the problem-solving aspect of the job. Zane Bond, team leader at a software company's Tampa, Fla., help desk, loves identifying potential causes and analyzing them step-by-step. "I am the go-to guy for angry" callers, he says. He never takes it personally when callers vent but listens intently and tries to start building a relationship. Then he tells them confidently: "We are going to fix this."

The more stressed or frustrated callers are at the outset, the happier they are when he finds a solution, he says. One help-desk manager who had been under attack by her bosses for weeks over a hardware problem was "over the moon" when he fixed it, he says.

It helps that Mr. Bond has fun with his work team members, who often collaborate on solutions. To ease stress, they play ferocious games of racquetball. They also stash toy rifles in their office and launch foam-dart battles on breaks, with the soundtrack from "Top Gun" playing in the background.

For most workers, however, customer service takes a heavy toll. Turnover ranges from 25% to 300% a year. Part of the problem is having to fake happiness, according to a German study. Call-center workers who were instructed to remain polite and friendly with angry, rude customers had elevated blood pressure long after ending a call, researchers found. Those allowed to react naturally and defend themselves were far less stressed.

In St. Louis, where angry calls over utility-service cutoffs for nonpayment of bills have soared, says Ronald Kohring of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, which represents the workers, an unusually high number of utility customer-service employees, six out of 150, are on disability leave.

Cody Nelson, a Salt Lake City customer-service worker for a bicycle maker, often deals with stressful calls from customers. He and his wife Beth Blackburn, who also works for the company in dealer service, commute home together and vent on the way.

Rock-Climbing to Relax

But after noticing the stress spilling into their evenings, they made a pact to stop talking about work the minute they pull into their driveway, Ms. Blackburn says. They go biking or rock-climbing to relax.

Sometimes, even trained customer-service workers can't control their emotions. As a customer-service manager at a Philadelphia supermarket, Amanda McKinney appreciated friendly customers but found many rude and dismissive. When a woman arrived one evening earlier this year after the customer-service desk was closed and demanded that she process a wire transfer immediately, Ms. McKinney refused. The woman "went from zero to a raging monster in less than a second," screaming and cursing, Ms. McKinney says. A manager tried to calm her, but Ms. McKinney lost her temper too and started screaming back.

"You are suspended!" the manager yelled, according to Ms. McKinney.

"No I'm not, I quit!" she replied, and stomped out. Embarrassed, Ms. McKinney says, "I wish I'd realized how close I was to snapping. I would have quit the day before." She has since enrolled in college and is studying computer science.

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