10 things you shouldn't do when working with an upset customer

By Calvin Sun

It's the call every IT support pro dreads. The customer has major concerns over slow performance or an outage, and you are the person who answered the phone or who is working the desk. Here are 10 mistakes to avoid when working with such a customer.

1 Taking their attitude personally

Chances are, you aren't the person who caused the problem. More likely, you're simply the person who drew the proverbial short straw. But the customer may see you as the representative of the technology that is causing the problem. It may be little solace when you're facing a tirade, but it still helps if you remember this difference. If you recognize that it's the technology, not you, that's creating the problem, you will have an easier time responding and resolving the situation.

2 Failing to allow the customer to vent

Last night, while preparing a salad for my wife to take to work, I was discussing with my daughter the importance of remaining calm. When I turned back to the salad, I found that Chester, our cat (the same cat who created laptop problems for me), was sampling it. Of course, I disregarded everything I just told my daughter, unleashing choice words for Chester.

Recognize that similar outbursts invariably accompany technology problems. Nothing you do can decrease or end such an outburst. In fact, if you cut off customers mid-rant, you will make them even more upset. As long as the venting doesn't involve obscenity or personal attack or abuse, it's best simply to let people vent. Once they've done so (and eventually they have to stop, if only because they run out of breath), you can begin discussing the issue rationally.

3 Ignoring the emotional

When a customer encounters a problem, an emotional reaction invariably occurs. The degree of this reaction, of course, depends on the nature of the problem and its implications. Someone having a problem with a personal PowerPoint, on Saturday morning, will react less strongly than someone with a PowerPoint problem an hour before a presentation to the CEO. An IT analyst who ignores this emotional aspect of a computer problem risks creating more problems with the customer.

When you're finished, or even while you're still working on the problem, take a second to say, "I know this problem is/was a pain" or "I know that solving this problem is important for you." When you do these things, you make the customer feel better. And you actually help yourself too. Because later, even if you don't solve the problem as quickly or as neatly as you like, the customer often will cut you some slack. Conversely, if you fail to acknowledge the customer this way, you could end up with a still-unhappy customer even if you solve the technical problem.

4 Focusing only on the technical

Too many IT analysts focus only on the technical nature of the problem. That is, they focus only on getting the application to work or making the network connection faster or getting the printer to print. However, while customers do want the technical problems resolved, they also want an acknowledgement that the problem did occur and that they were inconvenienced by it. If you focus only on the technical problem while failing to recognize and mention the inconvenience to your customers, chances are they'll remain dissatisfied even after you resolve the technical problem.

5   Falling into a "me vs. you" approach

Too often, the appearance of a problem causes the IT person and the customer to fall into an adversarial relationship, with finger pointing. Not only does this create extra stress, it delays problem resolution. Try as quickly as you can to focus the customer's concern on fixing the problem. That is, make the problem your common enemy. Ironically, this may lead to a closer bond to your customer.

6   Overusing "you"

This word, overused, can provoke a negative reaction and make customers feel defensive. Consider rephrasing the statement passively, or using "I" instead. For example, rather than say, "You didn't back up the document" (and maybe the user wasn't supposed to do so in the first place), consider saying, "The document wasn't backed up." Instead of saying "You need to speak louder," consider, "I'm having trouble hearing."

Another area of confusion (and hence needless aggravation) involves the personalization of computers. Instead of saying "*You* have a memory problem," it's better to be specific and say, "Your *computer* has a memory problem."

7   Making inappropriate physical gestures

No, I don't mean THOSE gestures. I'm referring to the more innocent ones, which still can aggravate. Have you ever taken your car for service and had the mechanic look under your hood and then whistle? My rule of thumb always has been that amount of the final bill correlates to the length of the whistle. When you heard that whistle, how did you react? No doubt you felt a hole burning in your pocket, right?

In the same way, be careful about how you react to things your customers tell you about a problem. Of course they failed to do a backup. Of course they populated the database with the wrong data. Even though you want to pull out your hair, roll your eyes, or simply scream, try to refrain from doing so. Likewise, try to refrain from the "Oh no," the exasperated "I don't believe it," or your car mechanic's whistle. Those customers have turned to for help. Reacting the wrong way may upset them, make them angry at you, or cause them to lose confidence in you.

I'm not saying you must sugarcoat the situation. If the problem is serious, say so -- but try to be as level-headed as possible when you do.

8   Telling customers to calm down

None of us would try to douse a fire by putting gasoline on it. When we tell a customer to "calm down," though, that's exactly what we're doing. The customer will not calm down. In fact, the customer will angrily deny being angry and become even more angry at your suggestion.

An upset person is like a person with the flu. Those feelings of anger simply have to run their course, and only then can you deal rationally with the person. During all of the customer service sessions I have taught, I have had ONE person tell me that saying "calm down" actually worked. The odds are against you. Stay away from that phrase.

9   Using slang synonyms for "upset"

We all use slang. But you should avoid using slang words for "upset." If you're talking with the customer, never say, "I'm sorry that you're…

- Freaking out
- Flipping out
- [All] bent out of shape

Using those phrases can send a signal that you aren't taking the situation seriously or that you're making fun of the person. Avoid those phrases even if you're talking about the situation to someone other than the customer -- for example, to a co-worker. Word might get back to the customer, and you could have a problem.

10   Failing to take advantage of physical positioning

Use physical positioning to your advantage when dealing in person with an upset customer. Are the two of you standing? Then find a place to sit down. Sitting carries more peaceful connotations, because physical combat is more difficult from that position. Once you're seated, remove barriers. If you are behind a desk or a counter, come out from behind it and sit on the same side as the customer. If the two of you are looking at a document, map, or diagram, position yourself so that you are facing the same direction as the customer. Doing all of these things sends the message that you and the customer are on the same side.

Additional resources

- TechRepublic's Downloads RSS Feed **XML**
- Sign up for the Downloads at TechRepublic newsletter
- Sign up for our 10 Things Newsletter
- Check out all of TechRepublic's free newsletters
- 10 things that drive your users crazy
- 10+ user complaints about IT support
- Jeff Dray's top 10 help desk calls

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