

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Identify strategies to use with a difficult customer.

### Objectives:

- A. Identify the common types of difficult customers.
- B. Explain the causes of handling a difficult customer ineffectively.
- C. Describe the skills needed to handle a difficult customer.

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### MODULE 4H: INFORMATION SHEET

*TO THE STUDENT: Read and study this information sheet and complete the student activity at the end.*

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#### **The best work environment**

The best work environment is one in which employers and employees work together as a team, supporting, leading, and sharing goals. In such an environment, each person must meet his or her responsibilities and do a good job. Every employee on the team must help the employer sustain this spirit of cooperation and achievement. One of the biggest challenges that a team can face is in dealing with a difficult customer. If you can't handle such challenges effectively, you will be limited in your ability to respond to a variety of customers. If you have difficult customer relations, you may lose your job.

#### **Difficult Customers**

Every business has its difficult customers. We all know them, the people who complain about everything. They come in all shapes and sizes, but here are a few of the more common types.

- People who know everything (some even appear—or try to appear—to know your

business better than you do.)

- People who are indecisive and don't know what they want.
- People who are rude or thoughtless to personnel or salespeople.
- People who always want to negotiate a lower price for a service or product.

These types of customers, whether right or wrong, can create difficulties in any workplace. Their way of handling problems is often to attack the people who serve them, including you. Complaints, real or imagined, can create a negative impression for your organization and may even cause problems with your employer down the road.

### Causes of Handling a Difficult Customer Ineffectively

A major problem that often arises in handling difficult customers is when the employee takes the whole incident as a contest of wills and decided to show the customer who's right. Here are some possible causes for this behavior.

- Failure to listen carefully to the customer's complaint.
- Failure to try to see the other person's point of view.
- Failure to acknowledge that the customer may be right (or at least partially right).
- Failure to negotiate (to try to achieve a "win-win" solution).
- Failure to be flexible.
- Failure to find creative ways to address and solve the problem.

### How to Handle Difficult Customers

Handling difficult customers effectively is often a matter of three qualities: tact, creativity, and empathy. Let's look at the role of each of these qualities.

***Tact*** is the ability to present or state the truth in positive and non-threatening terms. For example, if a customer asks your opinion about a certain purchase, you can respond, truthfully but tactlessly: "Oh, that's too much for you! You can't afford that!" A more tactful response would point out that the product chosen is more than the customer needs; that a scaled-down version of the product (which is also less expensive) would meet the customer's needs just as well.

**Creativity** is the ability to find unusual solutions to a client or customer's unique problems. Instead of recommending the standard software package to a client who wants a simple database management program, for example, you might find a less popular piece of software that does everything the client want and has several other features that he/she didn't explicitly request.

**Empathy** refers to the ability to put yourself in the customer's position, trying to understand and identify with his/her situation. Thus, you begin a conversation with a difficult customer who has a list of complaints about your business by listening carefully to him or her.

It may help to recall similar situations when you were angry or annoyed with a store or company. You don't have to tell each incident to the client - just let him or her know that you have had similar experiences and share their feelings of frustration.

Often, the customer's greatest need is simply to be heard - he or she wants to make sure that someone is listening to the story. If that someone happens to be you, listen carefully. Often the real complaint isn't the one the customer brings to you - it's something different.

The customer who begins talking about the poor quality of something he bought at your store may go on to talk about the declining quality of all merchandises of a certain kind. He's expressing frustration with not being able to get some product or service that was once very important to him, not just with your store's inability to deliver.

### Case Study - "*Difficult Diane*"

Diane works in an exclusive women's clothing store. The store customarily accepts returns on merchandise only within ten days of the purchase.

Sally Smith is one of the store's best customers. She often calls the store and asks that the merchandise be sent to her home via UPS. Sally travels a lot and often doesn't have the time to come in and try on items.

Diane had several blouses and a skirt sent to Sally's home. Two weeks later, Sally appeared at the store to return one blouse. "Wrong size, wrong color, wrong everything," explained Sally. "You sent the wrong thing!"

Diane reminded Sally of the store policy on returns. But Sally became angry, "It was YOUR fault!" she snapped at Diane. Diane became irate and shouted back at Sally, and an argument ensued. At last, Diane's supervisor came by to see what the trouble was.

Diane angrily explained, "She's trying to make us change our policy on returns! No way!"

When the supervisor heard the story, she took Diane aside and explained that Sally was one of their best customers and that in this case we can make the return ten days from the date of arrival rather than the date of order. "Rules can be bent a little for customers like her, so go back and tell her that we'll accept the return."

Diane refused to back down and walked away in a huff and the supervisor had to finish the transaction for her. Sally made the return and went home with the blouse she originally ordered. Diane will soon be looking for a new job - one in which she doesn't deal directly with customers.

### **Problem Prevention**

How can you prevent problems with difficult customers? Learn from the scenario above. Don't try to challenge the customer or prove him/her wrong in order to prove your point. In addition, follow these guidelines:

Agree with any points that the customer makes that are true. Don't get into a contest in which you argue every point the customer makes.

Try to find a win-win solution - a situation in which you and your business get what you want and need, but the customer also gets something he/she wants. While the old phrase, "The customer is always right." isn't literally true, it is operationally true--that is businesses should operate as if it were true.

Try to focus on "the big picture," which includes repeat business and an ongoing relationship with the customer. Instead of becoming involved in a contest of wills with the customer over the current issue, try to foresee what your future relationship with him or her will be like. It may be necessary to make concessions in order to preserve or build better relationships in the future.

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**MODULE 4H: STUDENT ACTIVITIES**

*TO THE STUDENT: Read and study the information sheet above and complete the following questions.*

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1. Why is it important to handle difficult customers effectively?
2. What might be some difficult customers for you to handle? Why?
3. What does "tact" mean? Give an example of an incident where you used (or might have used) tact in handling a difficult situation.
4. What is the relationship between creative thinking and handling a difficult customer? Explain your answer.
5. Have you ever been a difficult customer in a business situation? Explain why you felt the need to be difficult.



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**MODULE 4H: STANDARDS ADDRESSED IN THIS MODULE**

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**Pennsylvania’s Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening (RWSL)**

**1.1.11. Learning to Read Independently**

- E. Establish a reading vocabulary by identifying and correctly using new words acquired through the study of their relationships to other words. Use a dictionary or related reference.

**1.5.11. Quality of Writing**

- F. Edit writing using the conventions of language.
- Spell all words correctly.
  - Use capital letters correctly.
  - Punctuate correctly (periods, exclamation points, question marks, commas, quotation marks, apostrophes, colons, semicolons, parentheses, hyphens, brackets, ellipses).
  - Use nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions and interjections properly.
  - Use complete sentences (simple, compound, complex, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory and imperative).