What to Say to a Porcupine: Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Customers
In today’s challenging service environment, the most important thing you can do is hold on to your customers and make them happy. Customers tell more people when they have had an unhappy customer experience versus a happy one, and often what they say can make the difference in customer satisfaction and ultimately revenue for your organization – particularly in a Web 2.0 world where people have a soapbox as wide as the Internet.

So how do you deliver on this goal when you have a prickly customer on the other end of the line? Difficult customer situations are the bane of every customer support operation, no matter how well-managed they are. They impact your morale and turnover as well as your customer satisfaction. But they also represent transactions that can be understood and managed with the right skills. In this Parature white paper, we are going to look at several challenging customer situations, and the mechanics of how to deal with them.

The way you handle challenging customers involves specific communications techniques, based on known principles of behavioral psychology, that change the way people react to you in your most difficult situations. Our hope is to send you away seeing these situations in a light that you have never seen them before – as a set of procedural skills, which your team can learn and practice, that in turn have a real and measurable impact on your performance metrics.

Understanding the Prickly Customer

Prickly customer situations happen for a variety of reasons, ranging from caller personalities to missed expectations. We have all, in fact, been angry customers ourselves. And given what we know about human psychology, we can deconstruct a few traits that are common to most of these situations:

- **People react in predictable ways.** Nearly everything we say to a customer has a reaction that can be understood ahead of time, before we even open our mouth.
- **Our human nature almost always fails us.** Most of us are basically nice people who want to make customers happy. But when we are confronted with someone who is rude, angry, or demanding things we cannot provide, most of us revert to self-protective responses that actually make the other person angrier.
- **Most difficult customer situations can be prevented ahead of time.** There are common pitfalls that, in fact, cause many customer situations to escalate, no matter how polite we think we are. For example, most of us rarely acknowledge or paraphrase customers without training – and yet this lack of acknowledgment can often cause a customer situation to spiral into anger and frustration.
The right words can defuse almost any situation. There is nothing “soft” about soft skills in the 21st century. Given current research in behavioral psychology, the science of how we communicate in critical situations has advanced considerably in even the last few years – and the same skills that crisis counselors, police officers and hostage negotiators use in critical situations can also become a strategic tool for your support organization.

As a result, handling difficult customer situations involves much more than simply being a nice person with a “good attitude.” In reality, it is a thoughtfully composed performance that anyone can learn and practice. Let’s first look at a quick example of how the right words can dramatically change even a very tough customer situation:

**We just towed your car away. Can we help you?**

Many years ago, a parking and traffic bureau sought training on how to handle difficult customer situations. Why? Because their job involved towing people’s cars away and their “customers” often weren’t very happy about it – which led to a lot of stress for their front-line employees!

When asked what they normally said to someone whose car was just towed away, their responses were things like, “I’m sorry sir, you shouldn’t have parked here, and I’m afraid you’ll have to pay a fine to get your car back” – and when asked how people reacted to these statements, the response was, “Really, really badly.”

So we taught them to do two things. The first thing was to acknowledge and validate whatever the customer was feeling. That’s the easy part – most of us can get our arms around that concept, even if we don’t often do it. But the other part was to ask them what they could say that would benefit these customers. After a lot of hemming and hawing and squirming in their seats, what they came up with was beautiful:

“Your car is in a safe place.”
“I know where your car is.”
“I can help you get your car back.”
“I get frustrated when things like this happen to me, so I know how you feel.”

Feel the tension start to lower? That is the power of using the right words in a critical situation; and today, almost no one gets angry with these people, even when their cars are impounded!
Manage Your Own Prickly Customer Situations:

✓ Using **reflective listening** to engage customers
✓ Using **staging** to deliver feedback or bad news without getting people upset
✓ Using **playback** and **phrase substitution** to show respect and empathy
✓ Using the **can-can** to prevent confrontations and avoid saying "no" to people
✓ Using the **triple-A technique** to defuse a customer crisis

Reflective Listening

Suppose that a caller tells you curtly that she has been waiting on hold for a long time. What should you say to her?

a) I'm sorry.
b) I understand.
c) We have been extremely busy today because of a new product release.
d) It sounds like you had a very long wait. Let’s see what we can do to help from here.

All of these sound like polite things to say. But only one of them – choice “d” – reflects on what the other person experienced before you began speaking with her. Ninety-eight percent of the time we don't acknowledge what other people tell us before we start speaking, and when we do, it makes a powerful impact on how they react to us.

This is an example of what we call **reflective listening**, a technique first introduced in the mid 20th century by the great psychologist Carl Rogers, who taught us that the amount of empathy someone feels is every bit as important as what you actually do for them. Here are some of the elements of reflective listening:

✓ Give customers your undivided attention as they share their concerns
✓ Use “minimal encouragements” such as “I see” or “OK” as the other person is talking, to acknowledge them
✓ Paraphrase what the other party says before you reply
✓ Share your knowledge and expertise about the situation in response

Each of these steps defuses conflict by making it clear that you understand and accept how the customer sees a situation – even if you disagree with him or her – and have an interest in helping them. Listen closely to a typical conversation, and you will be surprised how little people actually paraphrase or acknowledge each other – but when you learn to do this, the difference in how customers respond is remarkable. The same goes for proactively sharing your expertise: being in service doesn’t mean being humble and servile, but rather giving them that warm, fuzzy feeling that they are in the right place to get help.
Using Staging to Deliver Bad News

Suppose that a customer is calling to have his product repaired, and you discover that it is out of warranty – and you have no flexibility in covering the repair. What would you say first to this customer?

a) Your product is out of warranty.
b) Let me go through the details of your warranty with you.
c) You should have purchased the extended warranty.
d) I am afraid that you will have to pay for any repairs at this point.

The correct answer here is “b”. Why? Because it is the only answer that prepares the customer for the fact that you are about to tell him something important. This follows a principle of psychology known as systematic desensitization, where you help people absorb bad news by giving it to them in stages.

This so-called staging approach helps you effectively manage situations where you know people will not be happy with what you tell them. It involves a three step process:

- Introduce what you are going to say before you say it – for example, tell them what you are about to discuss, acknowledge the customer's agenda, or explain that you want to go over options with them. You could summarize this step as “give the bad news second, not first.”
- Explain the reason for what you are saying as you are saying it. Most of us say as little as possible on an uncomfortable topic because we instinctively move away from the pain. When we move toward the pain with more details, customers calm down.
- Empathize with the customer's feelings after you have said it. No matter what a customer says, their feelings are never wrong for them, and you can always acknowledge how they see the situation – even if it is just to say, “I can tell by your tone of voice that you are not happy about this.”

Each of these steps seems logical at first glance, but all of them are exactly the opposite of our human nature. Instead of introducing things, we tend to simply blurt out the bad news first. Instead of giving details, we tend to say as little as possible which transmits a lack of caring. And normally, we never ever respond to a customer's feelings, but instead defend our organization and/or its policies.

This is why staging takes practice, and ideally planning in advance for your most common situations – and why the very best service organizations use this technique to their advantage. Done well, it is a very powerful tool that lowers the hostility of a customer's reaction and facilitates working effectively with him or her to try and find the best solution to their problem.

One sunny afternoon, a hedgehog named Suzy came into Rabbit Express with an important parcel – an antique family portrait carefully packaged in a sturdy shipping box. A burly, unshaven hare in a grease-stained uniform lumbered up to the counter. “Whaddya want, ma'am?”

“I'd like to send this package to my family in East Meadow,” Suzy said expectantly. “It's for a family reunion this weekend.”

Scanning the address quickly, the hare replied, “Sorry, ma'am. Out of our delivery zone. Nuttin' we can do,” as he tossed the package to the side.

Adapted from “What to Say to a Porcupine: 20 Humorous Tales that Get to the Heart of Great Customer Service” by Richard S. Gallagher
Showing Respect and Empathy

What is the difference between respect and empathy? These are very similar-sounding words with different meanings, both of which are important to preventing prickly customer situations:

- **Respect** involves acknowledging the *agenda* that a customer brings to every transaction – for example, how quickly someone wants something done, how little he or she wants to pay, or how important this issue is to the customer.
- **Empathy** involves a customer's *feelings*, spoken or unspoken. All of us want to feel respected, and none of us wants to feel stupid, no matter what the situation. When we ignore a customer's feelings, we risk causing a bad reaction no matter how well we take care of the transaction itself.

First, let’s look at how to show people respect using an approach called the **playback** technique. We call it by this name because it involves taking the other person’s words and playing them back, by rephrasing the other person in a way that acknowledges their agenda. Some examples of using playback are as follows:

Because you ____, I am going to ____
Because you ____, I recommend ____

In each of these cases, you are taking the other person’s words, gift-wrapping them with your response, and handing them back to this person. This is a powerful way to prevent conflict, because most arguments start when people feel we don’t understand their view of the world. When you use playback and openly package the customer’s agenda in your response – even when you cannot give people exactly what they are asking for – it takes away much of the reason for fighting.

**What not to say to an accident victim**

One person was involved in an automobile accident caused by another party – and when he was calling from the repair shop, with a smashed-up car and a splitting headache, an agent from the other party’s insurance call center told him,

“Sir, you have to understand that we have a backlog and everyone wants to get their car fixed. We can’t get back to you on this for at least three days.”

This customer’s response to this was, unfortunately for the agent, not very strength-based! Now, let’s try saying exactly the same thing using the playback approach:

“Because we want to help you get your car repaired as soon as possible, we will respond to you as quickly as we can within the next 72 hours.”

Feel the heat level get a lot lower? This is the kind of outcome you want to have with your own customer transactions.
Another approach that shows people respect is what we call **phrase substitution**, a technique where you take the “yes” or “no” you say to people and replace with phrases that are more positive, enthusiastic, and focused on the customer agenda – for example, instead of saying “yes” or “OK,” you might say “Absolutely” or “I would be delighted to.” Here are some more examples of phrase substitution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original statement</th>
<th>Phrase substitution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can.</td>
<td>I sure can.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t.</td>
<td>I wish I could.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is the best I can do.</td>
<td>I realize you want “x,” so we’re going to come as close as possible by doing “y.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here is the answer.</td>
<td>Given what you’ve asked for, I’m going to suggest the following solution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Showing empathy is a matter of using a similar approach with a customer’s feelings, spoken or unspoken. Here your goal is to make it clear that their feelings are normal, by sharing common experiences and reaffirming the customer’s situation (“Many people have the same experience you did.”) Believe it or not, police officers even use this technique commonly with people they apprehend to defuse their emotions and keep everyone safe! With your own most common situations, good respect and empathy statements should be part of your scripts and part of your metrics.

**Using the Can-Can to Prevent Confrontations**

In a customer support center, you are often confronted with the impossible by customers. So when is it OK to say “no” to someone?

- a) When they are making an unrealistic demand
- b) When they want you to take responsibility for something that is their fault
- c) Anytime you cannot give them what they want
- d) Never ever

The answer, believe it or not, is “d.” You can never effectively criticize people or say “no” to them – no matter how “right” you are – because we all have a strong survival instinct that causes us to react to being challenged. Instead, use a simple and powerful technique called the can-can: focus on what you can acknowledge and can do for a customer, no matter how small it is. Here are some examples of the can-can:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Can’t phrases</th>
<th>Can-can phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m not the right person to fix this</td>
<td>I want to make sure this gets fixed for you, and I’m going to put you in touch with the right person to help you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s the end of my shift</td>
<td>We will stick with this issue until we resolve it, and my partner Sally is going to take over from here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t give you a refund</td>
<td>If it will help you get something you like, I can give you a 20% discount.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can’t possibly do that</td>
<td>Given what you want, let’s look at some options.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The can-can does not come naturally to most of us. As we mentioned earlier, the vast majority of us do not acknowledge people in customer transactions – we tend instead to focus on our policies, our procedures, and the like. And when someone is demanding X, it feels really funny to say “I can do Y”, when Y is much smaller – because every fiber of our body wants us to talk about what we can’t do. But when you learn to talk in terms of what is possible, you trigger an instinctive friend-versus-foe reflex in your favor that keeps people from getting angry with you.

So what about those cases where a customer is really pressuring you about something you can’t do, and it is very tempting to say “no”? Use the magic phrases “I wish” and “even though” to move the focus back to what you can do: for example, “I wish I could do this for you, and I realize that is it very important to you. Even though we can’t do that, I would like to explore some other options.” With time and practice, you may find that the word “no” disappears entirely from your vocabulary, and your customers will thank you for it!

**Defusing a Customer Crisis**

With the right communications skills, the vast majority of angry customer situations can be prevented. But you can never rule out situations where a customer might erupt, for reasons ranging from a short fuse to the gravity of the situation. Anger is uncomfortable for everyone, but using what we call the triple-A technique, you can usually bring even these situations under control.

As the name implies, the triple-A technique has three steps that each begin with the letter A:

- **Acknowledgement**: acknowledge feelings and give the problem importance
- **Assessment**: gather facts and assess the situation
- **Alternatives**: set boundaries and sell alternatives

Anger is one of our most powerful and intimate emotions, and there is no one phrase that will turn people from angry to not angry. So it is important to follow these steps in order, so that you reduce a customer’s anger in stages to where you can talk rationally with them and negotiate a solution.

“We’re all knights. And from what you’ve described, it sounds like you could use a little valor and chivalry among the masses,” said Sir Gawain.

“Well, you’re in luck,” replied King Arthur, “because speaking of masses, there’s a crowd of angry peasants outside the gates right now. Have fun.”

Gawain tipped his hat, took his leave, and – thinking quickly – took a detour through the castle kitchen, emerging with a tray of pastries. Heading toward the angry mob, he held the tray aloft. “A gift to thee from the king,” he declared, as the peasants gathered around him. They soon devoured the pastries and headed back to their hovels, with satisfied but puzzled looks on their faces.

“They’re all gone now,” proclaimed Gawain as he returned to the castle. “Incredible,” replied the king. “I have never been able to break up these mobs before, even with ten armed men! Oh, and by the way, we’re missing a tray of pastries I was about to offer you …”

*Adapted from “What to Say to a Porcupine: 20 Humorous Tales that Get to the Heart of Great Customer Service” by Richard S. Gallagher*
For the acknowledgement step of the process, there are what we call three “octane levels” of how you can acknowledge people:

- **Simple acknowledgement.** Here, you are not agreeing with someone, only observing how he or she feels – for example, “I can tell you are frustrated about this.”
- **Validation.** Here you are telling people that their feelings are valid and shared by others – for example, “Lots of people get frustrated about this.”
- **Identification.** The highest level of acknowledgement comes when you can put things in terms of your own experience – for example, “I would be frustrated if this happened to me as well.”

The higher the octane level you can go, the better other people feel. Of course, you can’t always use the higher octane levels – for example, if someone says they are so angry they smashed their computer, you don’t want to validate that! – but in general, the more you can identify with the other person, the sooner they will calm down.

How long should you acknowledge the other person? Until you start to feel the temperature drop. And be aware that it is often the last thing we want to do when we are being confronted. Normally we defend ourselves and acknowledge the other person as little as possible, which in turn only makes the other person angrier.

In the second phase of this process, asking good assessment questions shows interest and gathers data that can be used to help resolve the issue. And the alternatives process – which is nothing more than the can-can technique we discussed earlier – helps you close in on a solution once things have started to calm down.

One closing point on customer anger is that the phrase “the customer is always right” is not always correct. There is a line between difficult and abusive customer situations. It is OK to expect customers to respect your boundaries as a human being, and to escalate or terminate abusive customers when needed. (In fact, there is some interesting psychology behind escalating, because it often triggers a desire for the customer to appear to be the rational one once they reach a supervisor.) So understand your limits, and have a plan in place to keep everyone safe.

**Closing Thoughts**

You can prevent or manage almost any difficult situation with the right communications skills – it’s all about technique, not attitude. These skills are remarkably effective and get better with practice. More important, they translate to all of your interactions with people, and serve as important life skills for everyone on your support team.

Be aware also that most of the techniques presented here go against our human nature, so they require time and coaching to implement – but when you learn and practice them, your support metrics will change. So will your morale and turnover. Above all, your team’s communication skills will become a strategic asset that works in concert with your policies, procedures, metrics and CRM environment to deliver great service – even in your most prickly situations.
ABOUT PARATURE

Parature, the leader in on-demand customer service software, makes it possible for any business to leverage the Internet to provide outstanding customer service. The company’s software-as-a-service (SaaS) delivery and integrated, intuitive design enables organizations to better and more efficiently serve, support, engage with and retain customers in today’s Web world. Founded in 2000, Parature received the 2007 and 2008 Product of the Year Award from Customer Interaction Solutions magazine and has been named to the Inc. 5000 list of Fastest Growing Private Companies in America. For the past three consecutive years Parature has been on the Washington Business Journal’s list of Best Places to Work. Headquartered in Vienna, Virginia, Parature is at work in organizations of all types and sizes, and helps support more than 10 million end users worldwide. For more information, visit www.parature.com.

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