



## This Year, Resolve to Give Great Service to Every Customer

By Kimberly Chapman, University of Wyoming Extension  
West Area Community Development Educator

The start of a new year is always a popular time to make resolutions: to lose weight, to save money, to spend more time with family, or to pursue a new hobby. All of these are admirable goals to be sure, but for a small business owner perhaps the best resolution of all is to serve every customer to the very best of your ability. According to a study conducted by American Express, 70 percent of consumers would be willing to pay higher prices at a business that offered good customer service. (Note that it said good customer service, not great customer service, just *good* customer service!) The same study also found that eighty-one percent of consumers believe that small businesses generally offer superior customer service compared to larger companies.<sup>1</sup> This means that small businesses and family-owned enterprises have an edge with customers over bigger competitors. In order to keep that edge, small business operators must ensure that customer service is one of their top priorities.

With most customers it is easy to give good service, but there are situations (and customers) that stretch and strain your ability to give that same level of service. I am sure that every business owner/operator has experienced this: someone comes into your business and immediately you can tell that they are angry or upset. The person starts talking, it is not a pleasant conversation and things begin to escalate as each side



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### Tip of the Month

A new year heralds new hopes, new projects, reaching a major goal, and usually a list of new goals. This issue of *Enterprising Rural Families* newsletter is launched with a new design team. We plan to expand our contributors further into the University of Wyoming with our goal to provide information to help family enterprises navigate challenges and accomplish your goals.

Have you ever caught yourself saying that's not the way we do things around here? This may be rolling off your lips as you approach a conflict with a customer, supplier or an employee. Take a moment to

reflect upon the context in which the conflict is occurring. Every workplace, organization and community has a culture. Without understanding your culture it will be difficult to help the enterprise make enduring changes and address issues as they arise.

Culture is a mysterious word that sums up the atmosphere and environment that is created. It dictates the ways employees interact, their working practices and even the way in which satisfaction for work well done is defined. A good workplace culture can improve morale, boost productivity and improve the reputation of the enterprise. Alterna-

tively, a poor workplace culture can have damaging effects.

Culture is an important component of the business plan. Culture consists of the organization's values, beliefs and behaviors. You can obtain a picture of your current culture in several ways, one of which is observation.

- Observe the interaction of your employees with each other. Be impartial, look at work in progress with the eye of an outsider.

- Watch for emotions. Emotions are indicators of values.

- Look at objects and artifacts that sit on desks and hang on walls.



*“...perhaps the best resolution of all is to serve every customer to the very best of your ability...”*

gets more upset or angry. As this situation progresses, something kicks in in our bodies; something we are helpless to prevent because of centuries of genetic shaping. That something is called the fight or flight syndrome and it involves a series of biological processes. The first thing that happens is that two tiny organs above your kidneys pump adrenaline into your bloodstream. Second, your brain diverts blood from activities it deems non-essential to high-priority tasks such as hitting and running. Finally, your muscles in your arms and legs get more blood, the higher-level reasoning sections of your brain get less.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes it really seems that nature is a bit of a jokester; when the going gets tough, because of basic biology, you have keyed up arms and legs when you really need a cool head to keep the business relationship intact.

The main purpose of an attacker is to control you and your behavior and their favorite technique to gain control is to use bait. In his book *Defusing Hostile Customers*, Robert Bacal defines bait as “behaviors (verbal and non-verbal) designed to get you to react, usually in an emotional manner.”<sup>3</sup> Bait is usually highly charged and it is hard not to respond to it. However, it is imperative that you keep your cool and do not take the bait. If you can recognize bait for what it is, an attempt by the other person to control and irritate you, then you are well on your way to handling the situation satisfactorily.

When a customer is angry and/or hostile, it helps to keep in mind that their actions are motivated by a sense of helplessness. They may feel a number of things: that they are trapped in the situation, that they have no choices or alternatives, or that they are at the mercy of the “system.”<sup>4</sup> Customers get angry because of these feelings, we get scared because of fight or flight and the conversation goes badly. Angry people want three basic things: help, choices and acknowledgment. If they can see that you are making a genuine effort on their behalf, they are much less likely to be hostile to you personally.

If we want to deal with these customers effectively then we need to employ some effective strategies. The CARP System, created by Robert Bacal, is a good tool to use with angry and upset customers. It stands for Control, Acknowledge, Refocus and Problem Solve. Following the steps of the CARP technique in the correct order will help you deal with a difficult situation and help keep it from escalating out of your control.

The first step in the CARP System is **Control**. This stage is all about gaining control of the situation. As stated above, a hostile customer on the attack is looking to gain control of the conversation. Establish control of the interaction from the very beginning. You can do this by using appropriate greetings as soon as the customer approaches you. An effective greeting includes: eye contact; engaged body language; a calm, professional tone of voice; and a short, to-the-point greeting. It is also important that you keep self-control at all times during the interaction. To do this, take some time to think about what triggers aggravation or aggression in you. Is it someone who adopts a patronizing attitude? Is it sexist/racist comments? Is it someone who invades your personal space? Knowing your triggers will help you to maintain self-control during a confrontation. If you know what your buttons are then you can bolster them up and someone will be less likely to push those buttons.



The second step in the CARP System is **Acknowledgement**. In this stage you use active listening and empathy statements to acknowledge the concerns of the hostile person. The goal here is to make the angry customer feel that he or she is being listened to and respected, thereby diminishing their anger. You want to use empathetic statements to show the customer that you care about what they are going through or what they are feeling.

It is usually a good idea to combine the Control and Acknowledgement; especially if the client is sending signals of anger or hostility such as fidgetiness, looking at watch, scowling, etc. Remember that you should always be the first one to speak so that you can try to exert control over the conversation from the beginning.<sup>5</sup>

Empathy statements convey to the other person that you are interested and concerned about their situation and that you understand (or are trying to). They do not mean that you agree with the customer or excuse his or her abusive behavior. Empathy statements should be short, to the point, and not include the word BUT. Generally, the word BUT separates a positive and a negative statement. Once someone hears BUT, they focus only on the negative.

The trick to effective empathy statements is simple, be specific. Name the emotion and identify the source of the emotion. When the customer is very angry, Bacal suggests that you use empathy statements and then stop. If the customer is too angry for refocusing, keep using empathy statements like a broken record. Contrary to most communication principles, Bacal also suggests that you remove “I” from empathy statements. The reason is that you want to focus on the feelings of the angry person, not on yours. A good beginning for an empathy statement that removes “I” is to say, “It seems like...”<sup>6</sup>

Active listening responses are another way to show that you are making an effort to hear what the client has to say and that you are committed to getting it right. These responses can also help you clarify what is sometimes a disjointed, rambling statement made by an angry person. Active listening responses are very simple. They involve rephrasing what the customer has said and bouncing it back to the customer. When you rephrase what the customer has said be sure to remove hot words and harsh language.

Asking questions is another useful way to keep control of the conversation and show the customer that you are trying to understand their situation. Questions can be used in place of statements and can seem more cooperative because they allow the other person a chance to clarify. Be very careful with questions though. You do not want the customer to feel like it is an inquisition.

The R in CARP System refers to **Refocus**. An angry customer is often an irrational customer which makes it more difficult to resolve an issue. The Control and Acknowledge components are designed to calm the person down somewhat. Refocusing involves making the transition from dealing with emotions to dealing with actual problems. In Refocus, you use active listening responses and questions to make sure that you understand the situation clearly and that you are getting the person focused on the correct issue. You should try to move from acknowledging to refocusing as quickly as you can...or as quickly as the hostile person’s emotional state will let you.

The last stage of the CARP System is where you finally get to help the customer. You have gone through the other stages to establish a relationship which shows you care and want to help. In this step you finally take action. The process that you want to follow in **Problem Solving** is four-fold.

1. Share information with the customer. Let them know what you can and cannot do for them. Try to focus on what you can do.
2. Explore alternatives with that person. People are often angry and upset because they feel that they are powerless or have no options.
3. Agree on a course of action and make a plan for implementation. Agree on what is to be done, how it is to be done, and who will do it. At this point it might be a good idea to offer some sort of takeaway to the person. This could be a summary list of your agreement, directions for where a person might get more help, or some other piece of written information that the customer might find useful depending on the situation.



4. And the last step in Problem Solving is to implement the agreed upon course of action. You will want to check up on its progress regularly to make sure that it is getting done.

It is a natural human tendency to want to go straight to the Problem Solving stage. The problem with that is when you have a truly upset person, their first need is usually not problem solving; it is to have their feelings recognized and validated. By working through the first three steps, you will allow that person time to work through their need and possibly uncover other needs. And, hopefully, you will be able to end the interaction to both parties' satisfaction.

**Using Cooperative Language**

When dealing with an angry or hostile customer, it is helpful to use cooperative language. Cooperative language lets the other person know that you are willing to consider their position and work with them towards a solution. In contrast, Confrontational Language implies that you are not interested in exploring options or giving choices. Examples of each type include:

<b>Confrontational</b>	<b>Cooperative</b>
• I can't	• I don't think I can
• We never	• We don't usually
• You must have	• It's possible that
• You can't	• I don't think that's going to help you
• You should have	• If you...then you will...

<sup>1</sup>U. S. Small Business Administration. (2013, December 12) SBA Customer Service Training Transcript. Retrieved from [http://www.sba.gov/tools/sites/default/files/TRANSCRIPT\\_Customer\\_Service.pdf](http://www.sba.gov/tools/sites/default/files/TRANSCRIPT_Customer_Service.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Patterson, Kerry, et al. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*. Blacklick, OH: McGraw-Hill Professional, 2002.

<sup>3</sup>Bacal, Robert. *Defusing Hostile Customers Workbook*. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: Bacal & Associates, 1998.

<sup>4</sup>ibid.

<sup>5</sup>ibid.

<sup>6</sup>ibid.

