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Dealing With Customer Complaints - B.L.A.S.T

By [Albert Barneto](#)

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In a restaurant, not so far away, in the not so distant future, a telephone rings, a customer complains... and the battle begins!

Handling customer complaints doesn't have to always be a battle, with the right tools and responses you can use complaints to your advantage; to help you build your business. B.L.A.S.T is a great tool that is used by companies such as Yum! (Parent company of KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, A&W, and Long John Silvers). Training their employees in the basics of handling customer complaints. The acronym stands for:

Believe

Listen

Apologize

Satisfy

Thank

How does your company deal with customer complaints? The easiest way to find out is to pick up the phone and play the role of the complaining customer. What happened? If you were an irritated customer, would you return? Using the B.L.A.S.T guidelines, allows you to create a standardized method for dealing with your complainers and turning them into loyal customers.

Believe

This is the cornerstone of handling a customer complaint. Yes, the customer may be lying and be incorrect about their situation. It is important to understand that your customer believes that your establishment has wronged them.

Listen

Stop and listen to your customer's complaint. I'm not certain whether it's natural instinct or just plain stubbornness. As soon as a customer starts to complain, we start to think of how we will respond to the accusation before we are done listening, and too often the case, already have the response ready to fight back. Take a second, relax, and listen. On occasion a complaining customer will be rude, angry, and use vulgar language, stay the course

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and remain calm and level headed.

When the customer is done venting; in a calm, non-judgmental tone, repeat their problem. An example I used in my KFC for a mispacked order:

"What I hear you saying is that, you came in ordered and paid for 10 Pieces of chicken and when you got home, you only received 8, is that correct?"

By repeating the problem at hand, you've demonstrated your ability to the customer that you heard and understood their problem.

Listen and clarify. Never defend or justify. The customer doesn't care if you were shorthanded or if you're having a bad day, they only care that they get taken care of. No excuses, just solutions.

Apologize

Always apologize even if you did nothing wrong. From your customers' perspective, they have a legitimate complaint, and they expect an apology. It could be as simple as "I'm sorry we've inconvenienced you." or "I'm sorry I know how frustrating it is to buy dinner for my family, only not to have everything there when I get home" A sincere apology will usually diffuse a lot of frustration that the customer has. There is an exception to this rule though, if a customer calls with a critical complaint, such as food poisoning, don't apologize, it may be construed as an acceptance of guilt, instead refer to your company's procedures for such events.

Satisfy

Make it right. Ask the customer "What can I do to make this right for you"? Be the judge of what is fair of course, but allow them the opportunity to feel empowered over the situation. Many times they may ask for the problem be taken care of on their next visit or maybe that you talk to the person who made the mistake and correct them. We used a great system of sending out a personalized postcard apologizing for the mistake, it was a couple of handwritten sentences (yes, many times with spelling mistakes from my team members), but it was personal and always well received. We always gave them the unexpected as well, maybe a free dessert or an extra side dish just to show that we cared about them.

Thank

At the beginning, at the end, in the middle; it doesn't matter, thank the customer for calling and complaining.

Why? With the simple act of complaining, your customer is telling you "I care about your business and your success". They are giving you the opportunity to fix the problem and invite them back so they can give you more of their money. Puts a different spin on it doesn't it? Thank them for giving you that second chance, for letting you know that something in your restaurant didn't work like it normally does, for giving you the chance to make it right, and for the opportunity not to damage your reputation!

Reputation? I had to throw that one in. You work hard, day in day out, trying the best to make your business the best, and yet one unhappy customer can take it away from you. A happy customer will tell two or three friends about a good experience, but an unhappy customer will tell at least ten friends about their experience and it always multiplies through word of mouth. Case in point, when I moved cross country to my new hometown, I was at a Chamber of Commerce event and being the new person in the group, I introduced myself and what we did. No sooner than five minutes passed did I get a list of 10 restaurants in my area that in their opinion were in "need of my services". Only one person gave me a good restaurant. I didn't ask, I was told. To this day I still haven't been to those restaurants as a customer, why do I want to give them my hard earned money, when they made my new friends unhappy? It may not be a rational thought, but it is human nature.

Will some people take advantage of your kindness? Of course, a rule of thumb I used in my restaurant was:

First time shame on me,

Second time shame on me, but I'm watching you,

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Third time... Shame on you and I will make the decision on how I will deal with you as a customer. Keep track of who calls to complain, names, phone numbers for follow up, addresses for your postcards. Using a binder and tracking your complaints, you will be able to detect and deter those that would take advantage of your new complaint procedures.

Adding B.L.A.S.T to your expanding toolbox of customer service tools will help you in dealing with customer complaints and turn them around so they can tell their friends what great service you have!

Albert Barneto is a managing partner of CustomerTrend Mystery Shopping and Customer Satisfaction Surveys at <http://www.CustomerTrend.com> and has more than 15 years of professional experience as a front line manager evaluating the "pulse" of customers and employees. Customer satisfaction survey services are offered to restaurant and retail chains including Video Mystery Shopping, Telephone Mystery Shopping, and Employee Feedback Solutions. Albert Barneto may be reached toll free at 1-(866)-509-9888

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