

Bad relationship with a customer

If mishandled, a bad relationship with a current customer—especially an important one—could lead to more bad things: a bad job review, a bad reputation, and a bad bottom line for your company. It's that serious. The good news is that a few smart moves could salvage the situation, and maybe even result in a referral or testimonial.

What could be going on?

- The customer has a legitimate issue with your performance, someone else's performance at your company, or your company in general.
- In earlier conversations with the customer, you either consciously or unconsciously set unreasonable expectations.
- The customer is actually satisfied, but either likes to complain or is complaining as a way to try to negotiate a better deal.
- Something else is going on in the customer's life that is making them unhappy or biased against you, and you're the recipient of their misplaced frustration.

Ways to handle it:

1. If possible, meet face-to-face.

If someone is unhappy, speaking over the phone might not cut it—and emailing is definitely out. Meeting in person or via video call will allow you to better assess what's going on. Non-verbal cues can provide valuable insight into how bad things are, as well as help you gauge whether they're improving over the course of the conversation.

For example, if someone starts out by rarely making eye contact, and then gradually begins to meet your gaze for more extended periods, you're probably getting somewhere. Perhaps even more important, however, is the message you send by making the effort to talk face-to-face. Depending on the severity of the situation and the importance of the customer, you might even want to travel to the customer's location to pay them a visit.

2. Understand your customer.

How will you ever solve your customer's problems if you don't know where they're coming from? Rather than trying to talk the person into seeing things your way, focus on better understanding their point of view. Start by asking them about their relationship with your company and why they aren't happy.

3. Listen more than you talk.

Once you've asked about the customer's issue, listen—carefully, and for as long as it takes. Note the person's pain points, concerns about the relationship, and expectations. If you need more information, ask,

“Can you tell me a little more about that?” or
“Can you help me understand why you feel that way?”

Remember: This conversation isn't (just) about keeping the person's business. It's about rebuilding their trust in you and the relationship. So try to avoid blaming others, making excuses, or justifying the actions you or your company took, even if the customer is off base.

4. Empathize.

The best customer service and sales people are known for being easy to talk to—not just because they're good listeners, but also because they go one step further and express empathy. How? It's important not to fake it. Authenticity goes hand-in-hand with trust. You have to really want to understand.

Start by acknowledging the person's emotions (e.g.,

“That must have been a disappointment. I can definitely understand why you feel that way.”

). It may also help to paraphrase what the customer says and relay it back (this has the added benefit of ensuring that you've heard the person properly). For example, you could say something like

“It sounds as though the product really isn't what you had hoped. Is that your main concern, or is there another issue?”

5. Remain positive.

Even though you might feel really down about the situation, don't let your negativity make the customer's bad mood worse. Keep your body language and voice positive (e.g., good posture, smiling when appropriate, nodding). Even if you're on the phone, practice positive body language like smiling and using hand gestures—it can help you sound upbeat and convey your enthusiasm and commitment to fixing the problem.

6. Be ready to apologize.

Even if something isn't your fault or your company's fault, taking some responsibility for it could get the conversation headed in the right direction. If the customer is really upset and in "venting" mode, you might need to apologize more than once.

7. Be solution-oriented.

Instead of trying to hash out where things went wrong or who's to blame, be a problem solver (one caveat: Be careful not to start doing this until you have a firm grasp of the problem and have heard the customer out). If possible, come armed with a few options for resolving the issue and allow your solutions to direct the conversation down a more productive path.

This will show the person that you've thought about the problem and are trying to turn the situation around. It will also give the customer something to focus on that will genuinely help, versus staying stuck in "vent" mode.

Poor: *"I'm really sorry, but we aren't going to be able to have the redesign done by then. It's not possible to include all the elements you want on such short notice."*

Better: *"Maribel, I'm sorry this has happened. I can understand why it's so frustrating for you. I'd like to suggest a few things we can do to make it better. What if we were to add three of these site elements by January?"*

If the solutions are "win-win," even better.

8. In serious cases, get others involved.

Is this a relationship problem you can handle on your own? You might need to involve other team members and/or someone higher up. This is especially true when you're dealing with a customer who dislikes you for reasons beyond your control (e.g., your gender, race, or something else), is a perfectionist, or equates the status or number of people involved with their own importance.

Bring the problem to your manager. Come with specific examples of why the relationship is suffering, based on your conversations with the customer, as well as a proposed solution to the problem. Laying out the problem clearly with your boss can give you a solid understanding of who can best rebuild the relationship and how you can help.

9. Keep the lines of communication open.

Update the customer frequently about what you're doing to address the poor relationship. Even if you can't solve their problems—or solve them right away—regular communication alone is sometimes enough to improve matters.

“Gary, I talked to Amreen and she’s discussing the issue with our VP. She’ll be in touch soon. In the meantime, I’d like to have a follow-up conversation about what I can do to help you better in the future.”

For more tips, see [17 ways to persuade](#).