

## 4 Steps to Avoiding Negative Customer Service Situations

How do you turn a potentially ugly customer experience into one that customers tout to their friends?

It's easy – anticipate negative reactions from disgruntled customers and respond before they even have a chance to react.

But how can you handle a customer service issue *before* it happens? Use these four steps to get ahead of a challenging situation:

### 1. Make a plan to provide excellent customer service

Long before your customer finds reason to complain, develop a comprehensive plan. You'll need to pull together a team of employees to cover all the bases.

Follow the example of Southwest Airlines — they implemented the “[Proactive Customer Service](#)” program in which they analyze problematic issues and prepare in advance how to handle potential complaints.

Every day, a select team of Southwest Airlines' employees gathers to review the previous day's flights, as well as identify any delays due to inclement weather and other challenges that occurred. They then proactively handle any customer service problems by determining which issue requires an apology. These responses take the form of an offer, a discount voucher or even a free flight — with a hand-signed, personalized letter that speaks directly to the customer's experience.

Here's how you can implement the same practice. Take a good look at your business, and brainstorm situations that could arise:

- What could go wrong?
- What issues have you had that could reoccur?
- Are there any anticipated obstacles that could cause negative reactions from your customers?

With this information at hand, you can develop a proactive plan to handle any number of possible issues that could lead to irate customers.

### 2. Build a good relationship with your customers

Happy customers are more than just numbers in your accounting program. They're

satisfied, loyal customers who come back to you again and again — and they help build your business by referring their friends and colleagues to you.

To get more happy customers, you must establish strong relationships that go beyond taking and filling orders.

In his book [At Your Service](#), renowned customer-service expert Frank Eliason advises entrepreneurs to “create a culture of customer-centricity”: “[Customer service] is about relationships. And to invest in relationships requires a commitment to improving experiences and increasing empathy.”

Encourage a customer-focused culture throughout your business and at all your customer touch points.

Your online efforts could include a user-friendly website and blog, as well as a business account on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn and/or Pinterest where customers can engage with your company.

Also consider additional proactive steps such as recording friendly messages for your business’s phone number, holding open-house events and creating loyalty programs.

Continuously work with your team by focusing on every part of the customer experience. You’ll begin to build long-lasting relationships that will be the lifeblood of your business.

### 3. Be quick about it

It’s competitive out there. You know that a disgruntled customer can patronize plenty of other businesses for their purchasing needs, so it’s important to resolve any problems quickly. Try some of these approaches:

- **Respond immediately.** Use a preplanned message to let the customer know that you’re investigating the issue, and that you’ll have a solution as soon as possible.
- **Be “human.”** Let the customer know you understand their frustration, and that you’re going to do everything possible to make it right.
- **Go the extra mile.** Take a look at the customer’s entire transaction history so you can create a personalized offer to make things better.
- **Follow up fast.** Soon after fixing the problem, send an apology and include a “Thanks for being a customer” savings offer. If you’re going to turn that angry customer into one of your biggest fans, timing is essential.

### 4. Keep working at it

Remember, this isn’t a “one and done” kind of thing.

After you’ve developed a comprehensive customer service plan, you need to review it frequently and update it. Be sure to implement what you’ve learned from previous successes and anticipate future challenges.

Communicate with your customers regularly, and engage them as much as possible to keep building strong relationships.

Take these steps and always respond quickly when an issue arises — you’ll be

successful at turning dissatisfied customers into your biggest fans.

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