

Turn Your Toughest Customer Into Your Biggest Fan

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These 7 tips will help you transform your most difficult clients into big marketing victories.



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Watch out! Here comes Gladys. Or maybe it's Tim, Nelly, or Nigel. Whatever the name, this client is cranky and snappish, making even the most skilled professionals run for cover. Is it possible to convert this cantankerous customer into a fan?

Success coach and international speaker Marilyn Suttle offers a resounding yes.

In her best-selling book, *Who's Your Gladys? How to Turn Even the Most Difficult Customer Into Your Biggest Fan*, Suttle recognizes that most any business has their Gladys, and it can be a huge challenge, but there is hope. "When you practice emotion management and grow your creative problem-solving abilities, magic happens," says Suttle.

Here are Suttle's seven tips to turn tough customers into devoted fans who spread good news about your company. To learn more about creating world-class customer service, tune in to my interview with Suttle on Million Dollar Mindset radio.

1. Thank your customer for complaining, and mean it.

The most calming phrase you can say to a complaining client is, "Thank you for telling me." A genuine thank-you can be disarming. Be thankful that your customer is willing to tell you what most won't. It's a gift that may offer you insight into problems that other customers aren't willing to share. Eighty-nine percent of unhappy customers will simply take their business elsewhere without telling you why. Instead, they tell everyone else: their families, friends, and everyone in their social-media networks. When they do tell you, follow up your gratitude with, "I'm so sorry. Please tell me more."

2. Soothe yourself when customers rant.

When you're on the receiving end of a Gladys attack and your customer is angry and venting, do you bristle inside? Feel annoyed and defensive? What can you do? Soothe yourself. Tell yourself, "Venting is good. I choose to be calm and capable of creating a safe space for my customer to feel heard." Jumping in with a solution before a customer has fully expressed herself only makes things worse. Not until the negative feelings come out can good feelings flow in. (Much like turning on the shower--the icy-cold water comes out first before that warm water flows.)

3. Take the high road.

The customer isn't always right--but their perception of that matters. Managing perceptions is a necessary part of long-term success. Resist the urge to point fingers, pass blame, or make excuses. Instead, take ownership of the situation and restore trust. Remind yourself that you don't have to prove someone wrong to set things right. Before saying anything, ask yourself, "Is what I'm about to say truthful, useful, kind, and unifying?" If not, don't say it.

4. Get comfortable with conflict.

No one wakes up in the morning thinking, "I'm so glad I get to have a tough conversation with my client today." Conflict is uncomfortable. Even so, disruption is sometimes necessary for better results, deeper understanding, and stronger relationships to emerge. Avoiding a conflict doesn't make problems go away. You may get a temporary retreat from a client's displeasure by avoiding an angry phone message or email, but the longer you put it off, the harder it is to recover. It's a proven fact that when conflict is resolved well, a customer can become an even more devoted fan than they would have if there was never a problem in the first place. Managing conflict well builds trust and loyalty.

5. Pivot toward thoughts that inspire excellence.

How you think about your customers influences how you respond to them. It's so easy to slip into unhelpful thinking like, "My customer makes me want to pull out my hair and run screaming from the room!" When you notice it, reach for a more resourceful thought like, "My customer's persnickety personality gives me an opportunity to use my skills to win them over." This belief activates all your inner resources and puts you in a calmer, more inspired state of mind. Put pressure on coal and you get diamonds. That's good pressure. When a customer puts pressure on you, see it as a good way for you to grow your abilities.

6. Look for the positive qualities in your client's negative behavior.

Depending on your view, you can describe a customer as being "loud and demanding" or "excited and tenacious." When you look for the positive qualities in your challenging customer, you increase your ability to connect. Begin noticing the positive qualities and your clients will start responding to you differently. Consider "rude" as "willing to say what's on her mind." View "wishy-washy" as "someone who likes to weigh options."

7. Be prepared for service recovery.

When it comes to doing business, it's not a matter of if something will go wrong, it's a matter of when. Don't be surprised when it happens; be prepared. Ask, "How can I set things right and make you happy?" Often customers ask for a lot less than you might think, because what they really want to know is that you care. Go above and beyond to take care of them when things go wrong and you'll gain their loyalty.

Marla Tabaka is a small-business adviser who helps entrepreneurs around the globe grow their businesses well into the millions. She speaks widely on combining strategic and creative thinking for optimum success and happiness. @MarlaTabaka

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