

What Do You Say?

When Your Guest Feels Wronged

“I was here first. Why are you helping him?”

Now this can be a sticky situation. You can't dump the first customer to take care of the customer who thinks he or she has been bumped in line. But you still want to let the offended customer know that you appreciate her and will help her as soon as you can. The key is ... don't get defensive! Your best bet is to let her accusation roll right off your back and respond pleasantly with something like,

“I'm sorry if there's been some confusion. I'll be right with you. Thank you for your patience.”

But what if you're not sure who was there first? This can be even stickier. Again, be honest. Say something like,

“I'm sorry for the confusion. I didn't see who was here first. Let me finish up with this gentleman and I'll be right with you.”

If the guest you are helping really was there first, it's highly likely he won't argue the point because you are helping him. But if he believes he inadvertently stepped in front of the other customer, he'll probably apologize or even let her go ahead. Either way, the situation has been smoothed over a bit, thanks to you.

“I've talked to three different people and gotten three different answers. What's wrong with you people?”

It's likely this guest's frustration is turning to anger. Don't be surprised if he doesn't have much patience and lacks confidence in you and your company. Your best bet is to apologize and ask permission to try to turn things around.

*“I’m sorry if you’ve been given confusing information.
Would you be willing to talk me through the situation?”*

“Listen. I could take my business anywhere!”

Yes, we have talked a lot about treating your customer like a guest, but as tempting as it might be, this would not be the appropriate moment to respond with a smile and the words, “Be my guest.” This particular customer threat most often surfaces in a moment of extreme frustration and is usually delivered with a higher intensity and volume level than everyday conversation. No question about it—this guest feels wronged. To lower the emotional heat of the moment, reply calmly and quietly,

*“I’m sorry you’re upset. We do appreciate your business.
How would you prefer that we correct this for you?”*

Listen and let the customer vent. Then be prepared to discuss the matter with your manager.

“I hope you can be more helpful than that idiot in the other department!”

“You’re the only person here who seems to know what he’s doing.”

Whether this type of comment shows up as a personal jab at a teammate or an underhanded compliment to you, handle it the same. First, apologize for the inconvenience. Then refocus the conversation on your desire to serve your guest’s needs.

*“I’m sorry to hear that you’ve had a difficult time. Please,
tell me what I can do for you.”*

“Someone told me something totally different yesterday.”

*“I’m sorry that you’ve been given confusing information.
Would you be willing to talk me through the situation so
we can resolve it?”*

“I called specifically to make sure you had it. They said you did. I wouldn’t have made the trip otherwise.”

“I’m really sorry for the inconvenience. I would be upset too. Let me see what I can do to make this right for you.”

The key here is to know ahead of time (or find out immediately) what you can do for your customer. Can you order something from another store and have it shipped to your customer at no cost? Can you have something shipped to your store and held for the customer? Find out exactly what you can do to best solve your customer’s problem. Then explain it clearly to your customer with a renewed apology for the trouble already caused.

“You people never do what you say you’ll do.”

“I’m sorry if that’s happened. Would you be willing to let me try to make it right for you?”

“I made a reservation three weeks ago, and this is the table you stick me with?”

“I’m sorry. I certainly don’t want you to be unhappy with any part of your evening here. If you would sit here for just one minute, I will check up front to see what we can do for you.”

Hopefully you already know what you can offer your guest to appease her irritation. But if not, talk with a manager when you go to check on a different table, so you have a peace offering to give your guest when you return to the table.

“We’re really sorry for the inconvenience, ma’am. We will have a window table available in about 15 minutes. While you’re waiting, can we offer you a complimentary drink in the lounge?”

“Every time I see something in your ad in the newspaper that I want, I come in here and you’re out of it!”

“I’m sorry that’s happened. Tell me specifically what you want and I can get you a rain check or find out when we’re getting our next delivery.”

“You told me it would arrive in two weeks. It’s been almost three!”

“I’m sorry for the delay. I’m sure that’s frustrating. Let me see if I can help.”

“I said I received it as a gift! Why are you only crediting me the sale amount -- a sale that started today?”

Well, of course she doesn’t have a receipt. That would be too easy. But it doesn’t matter if the difference between the regular price and the sale price is \$8 or \$28. Are you willing to lose a customer because you don’t believe her when she says her parents gave it to her for her birthday, which was before your sale started? Why not just call her a liar and be done with it?

OK, we’re not the ones who are required to follow company policy. You are. So when you bring this customer issue to your manager’s attention, tell him that you believe her. And to your guest, say something like,

“I’m sorry. I know this can be frustrating. Let me talk to my manager.”

“That other guy said that he would call me back, and he never did.”

“I’m really sorry that happened. I can imagine how frustrating that must be. Tell me what you needed and I will find out for you.”

Remember that she has already been burned once. So if you find that you can't respond immediately, let your guest know exactly when you will get back to her with the information.

"It will take me a little time to find out for you. If you give me your telephone number, I will call you within the hour to let you know. And if it's going to take any longer than that, I will call and let you know that as well."

"Forget it now. Everyone is ready to go."

"I'm sorry your visit didn't go smoothly this time. How can I make it right for you?"

"What good is a confirmation number if it doesn't confirm anything?"

"I'm sorry you're upset. Let me see what we can do to make this right for you."

"You've got to be kidding me. How can a gift certificate no longer be valid?"

"I'm sorry. I am sure this is frustrating for you. Let me talk to my manager about what we can do."

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