



Module 11 : Customer Complaints Management

- How to handle customer complaints
- Understand and execute a proper complaints procedure
- What should be avoided when dealing with complaints
- The importance of a good complaints procedure

We have now established that customer care is an integral part of the job function of a PA. Unfortunately, you will not be able to keep every person happy no matter what you do. You must be prepared to do your best for each customer.

Having a valid, tried and tested complaints procedure is important for your organisation and the stability of your job.

In this module you will learn:

- How to handle customer complaints
- Understand and execute a proper complaints procedure
- What should be avoided when dealing with complaints
- The importance of a good complaints procedure

11.1 Introduction



While handling customer complaints may seem like a stressful task on the surface, it can actually turn into a pot of gold if handled in the correct manner.

Keep in mind the fact that a satisfied customer is likely to speak to three people while an angry customer is likely to speak to 300 people about their experience.

With the advent of social media, negative publicity can spread like wildfire and end up damaging your brand image.

The secret is to handle the angry customer in a way that transforms them into a loyal customer.

If you neglect the customer's feedback, there is a strong likelihood that many other customers may get annoyed about the very same problem.

If left unresolved and neglected: a) The problem is likely to linger on in internal processes and b) The problem is likely to get further perpetuated and will generate additional complaints in the long run. Managing customer complaints in an efficient manner helps retain customers and helps nip a potential problem in the bud.

Complaints can be challenging to handle and difficult to resolve (although complaints do give you an opportunity to identify and rectify specific problems in a current system or product). However, complaints handling can also help one develop a relationship with customers, increase your product knowledge and improve your experience of problem solving.

11.2 Develop a Strategy



You should have a clear and flexible policy for complaints that should be easy to use and understand.

A complaint can be a blessing in disguise and it is fortunate that a customer has taken the time to help point out a flaw in the system. Most customers may just walk away or refuse to return without providing a reason for their dissatisfaction.

Training

A good customer complaint training course will help build up your confidence. Being good at handling complaints comes with practise and it takes time to develop skills. Although it can initially seem stressful, customer complaint handling can prove extremely rewarding over time.

According to a research into customer behaviour from RightNow, customers do not usually switch brands due to pricing or quality issues, but due to poor customer service.

Handle Complaints with Authority and Priority

As a PA, you should always be aware that complaints are a priority and should be dealt with immediately. Complaints should be dealt with sufficient authority and your boss should give you the necessary power to resolve any problems.

Ensure complaints can be processed from all sources

There are 4 broad avenues commonly used to communicate customer complaints - in person, email or internet, telephone or postal service. It's important to consider the quality, speed and response initiative to customer complaints. You must consider recording the source of complaint.

Set up a log, archive or file to record and analyse ALL complaints so they can be shared with everybody, your boss and at staff meetings. You can learn a lot about company problems when you share your findings with other members of staff. One can learn a great deal about managers, employees, your product and public reputation through a well-recorded complaints procedure.

11.3 Handling complaints

These are the key steps to follow when handling a complaint:

Thank customers for communicating

As we previously mentioned, it is lucky to get a customer complaint. They are investing their time and money to let you know of existing or reoccurring problems. If they just walked away without complaining, your company has just missed out on an important opportunity to improve! No matter how rude the person is, always be polite and thank them for their time.

Always apologise

Keep in mind that you are apologising on behalf of the company. Put yourself in the customer's shoes so you can empathise with them and gain the opportunity to understand the issue in its totality. You are familiar with your company products or services and have heard the complaint at the same time. Use a combination of product knowledge and customer care and then deal with the matter accordingly.

Everyone is busy and if a customer has specifically taken the effort to communicate with you by phone or email, they obviously has something to say. If a customer has actually walked across to

your workplace in order to make a complaint, they deserve due consideration.

Let the customer give you every piece of information so you can fully understand the situation. If they are angry or emotional, talk them through the problem and this will give them a moment to calm down. Never hang up on somebody when they are speaking to you; in the event that a customer is abusive, ask them to refrain from using bad language. You can also call upon senior management to intervene.

Correct all mistakes

Make sure that you and the customer are on the same page as far as communication is concerned. Ask them what they expect to be done and then explain the options to them. If you are able to fix the problem, explain the probable time-frames involved and costs, if any. Ensure that all details of the resolution and follow-up are made clear to the client.

Learn from complaints

Inform customers that their constructive criticism helped you move forward as a company. When your manager keeps hearing of your ideas to use complaints to improve work processes, they will be more inclined to place trust in you.

You can minimise reasons for complaints, but is your company really doing everything to check that employees (who are actually internal customers) are happy? Does your company assess quality control and other measures?

Are other employers doing everything in their power to help improve customer relations? A successful company needs a cohesive staff and internal complaints should be handled with the same importance and promptitude as those of your customers. A company should lead by example and a good manager should be able to appreciate this.

It could cost 5 times more to get a new customer than retaining an old one. So it is in your interests as a PA to adopt a helpful and efficient attitude towards customer complaints.

Be generous with the investment of your time and effort.

Things to avoid

- Never laugh at a customer, no matter what they say to you and never argue back.
- Don't treat one complaint as something less serious than another. Regardless of seriousness, all complaints should be treated with thoughtful care and attention.

Activity 1 - Working with Customer Complaint Strategies

Estimated time: 10-15 minutes

If you fail to provide quality service, you will end up having complaints.

A customer complaint should be avoided at all costs, but you should be prepared in case it does happen. To ensure that you are prepared, write a sample customer complaint strategy. What is the first thing you should say to the client? Are there any follow-up actions you should take?

11.4 An example of a company complaints procedure

This is a sample checklist of what you could consider including in your complaint procedure checklist.

1. Use an identified complaint personnel who represents the company. In smaller companies, this is likely to be your job as a PA and it would be handled by a team in larger corporations.
2. Use somebody who is allocated to handle and investigate each complaint; the investigator should be suitable to handle senior decisions and resolve issues with the full authority of your manager. If possible, you should have had no prior involvement in the complaint you are investigating.
3. All arrangements should be in place to communicate with complaints by phone, letters and email. The company can even have a designated complaints handling address for your emails so they never get lost. This should be quoted in the complaints procedure.
4. Information on your website should include where to find your contact details; have everything marked clearly.

Make a checklist to ensure you also have a written procedure of how customers can complain. This can be presented any way as long as it looks professional. You should have this for internal staff also so they know how to handle complaints in the correct way.

5. A complaint leaflet should let people know that they can be made by phone, in person, post or by email.
6. Give full contact details so people know how to use them when needing to contact you.
7. Keep records of all complaints made against the company. They should all be archived and dealt with in quick succession.
8. Thank the customer and tell them when they can expect a reply from you in regard to dealing with their complaint. Give your name and let them know that you are the person dealing with the complaint.
9. Set a reasonable time limit for dealing with complaints; how long will it realistically take to

have them dealt with?

10. Allow enough time for clients to respond to you before closing any complaints procedures on certain cases. You must also deal with anonymous complaints.

11. Ensure all complaints will be handled by the correct individual who is qualified to do so.

12. Each individual should receive:

- Assistance in enabling them to understand the complaints procedure.
- Advice on where to obtain any help.
- Have a display in the reception or visitor's area on how to make complaints if necessary.

13. State that complaints should only be made under specific circumstances.

- Beginning with a written or verbal consent.
- Can the person complaining do so without specific health risks due to medical conditions?
- Is the representative acting in the user's best interests?
- Is the complaint 100% true?
- Offer other means for people with impaired sight or hearing to make complaints if necessary.

14. State that you will keep the complainant informed throughout the process of investigation.

15. State how long they should wait for the procedure to be dealt with, this will vary depending on seriousness of the case. State this in working days.

16. Tell them the maximum time within which the complaint can be expected to be resolved.

17. Co-operate with your customer and work out the best possible solution to resolve the complaint.

Activity 2 - Creating a Customer Complaint Procedure

Estimated time: 10-15 minutes

You should have your sample customer complaint strategy from the earlier activity, which is a crucial tool for you in your career. Hopefully, in your plan, you made every effort to ensure that complaints are handled from all sources.

In this next activity, you will create a customer complaints procedure, which will be a much longer document and should appear as a procedure checklist for employees to follow. Although there is a sample checklist in the module, you should make every effort to make your procedure original.

11.5 Useful Tips on Customer Complaints Handling



It is a good idea to set aside your emotions when you deal with customer complaints. If you start investing your personal emotions in each situation, you will find it difficult to resolve the issue with an open mind.

Listen to the complaint without challenging the customer. No customer will waste their time and invest their effort in communicating with you if there wasn't a problem in the first place. Listen to the customer and remember to thank them.

Acknowledge the complaint when you hear it. Try to see if you are able to pinpoint the exact reason for the complaint. Probable reasons could range from disillusionment over the quality of product, or the length of time that a service is taking or even the attitude of a colleague in your company.

Offer assistance and support to your customer. Whether you need to replace a defective product or offer after sales service, ensure that you show genuine interest and enthusiasm in helping out your clients. If you are not able to help them out, direct them to the person who will. Avoid referring the customer to too many people. The objective must be to try to sort out the complaint as quickly and reliably as possible.

There will be times when you are unable to help a client. For example, the warranty on the product may have expired, making it impossible to offer a free replacement. If you are faced with such a scenario, communicate the matter clearly to the client without allowing impatience or irritation to mar your interaction. Jot down notes and demonstrate that you have understood the details of their complaint very clearly.

Contracts and warranties often come with a lot of small print which the customer may not have understood fully. Even if you are unable to accommodate their request, make sure that they

understands the reasons behind it.

Offer an apology accompanied by a genuine concern for their welfare. Express your acknowledgement of their feelings of disappointment or anger when you say 'sorry'. Don't cut short the conversation; allow the upset customer to complete what they wish to communicate.

Make sure that customer complaints receive a follow-up about 48 hours after the complainant has communicated with you. If the customer was to be provided with after sales service, ensure that the team responsible for it has followed it through. Following up a customer complaint has two distinct advantages: Firstly, the complaint is resolved completely with all loose ends tied up. Secondly, the customer understands that the company is paying attention to their requirements.

Review and act on the new knowledge that you have gained. You may have realised that your product or service is riddled with an inherent defect that needs to be ironed out. Share the information with your company and implement any required changes at the earliest.

If you are able to resolve the issue, give feedback to the customer who brought it to your notice in the first place. Thank them for the input or consider offering them a freebie, discount or a gift in appreciation.

We get only one chance to handle a complaint in the right way. Mishandling the communication at this delicate stage will end up burning the bridge between the customer and the business. In extreme cases, mismanaged handling of a customer complaint may lead to unpleasant litigation. Timely assistance and intervention can prevent a problem from mushrooming into a stressful situation. Allow the customer to vent their feelings and describe the problem.

Take a Quick Recap Test

[viralQuiz id=76]

FACT



83% of customers agree that they feel more loyal to brands that respond and resolve their complaints

Source: khoros, 2023

Assignment

Customer Complaints Management

Time: 30+ minutes

Hopefully, you took in as much of the information in this 11th module as possible. To find out how well you have done, complete the following worksheet.

Download the worksheet below print out and complete.

[Download Worksheet \(PDF\)](#)

[Download Worksheet \(Word\)](#)

Module Summary

The ability of a company to handle customer complaints can determine its potential success. Handling customer complaints requires tact, diplomacy, interest and enthusiasm. A complaint can help a business refine and improve its services and products and counts as reliable feedback for further improvement.

A good customer complaints procedure outlines how to deal with complaints, respond quickly and be respectful of a customer's thoughts, needs and concerns.

Failing to deal with customer complaints will be bad for the future of your organisation.

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