Handling Dissatisfied Customers

By Dr. Ehab Heikal, Egypt

In my earlier book, I have written how to handle nega-

tive patients; I am adding here some extra tips.

There is a difference between dissatisfied or disappointed customers and complainers. The former often only have to answer to themselves; the latter most likely will have to answer to others about the results of their experience.

Everyone has dissatisfied or disappointed and complaining customers and clients. Businesses have them, organizations have them, government certainly has them, and, unfortunately both employers and employees have them.

Anyone offering ideas, information, skills, services or products has obligations:

1. The first obligation is to what is being offered – to make sure that what is being offered is presented in the best possible manner, given the limitations of time, space, effort, and/or money. These limitations should not be used as excuses for a poor presentation.

2. The second obligation is to give customers enough choices (more than one of two or yes or no but not so many as to confuse customers) so they believe that in making their decision to buy or not they have made the best decision. If customers sense they are not being given enough options, they will delay their decision until they find the right options to satisfy their needs.

This is called giving customers a “marketplace,” a place where they see what their options are.

3. The third obligation is to make sure one’s customers are never embarrassed for accepting or, even, contemplating accepting what is offered. If a customer thinks they will be embarrassed for buying a service or even contemplating buying or accepting what is offered that they will not bring the subject before their family, friends, associates, acquaintances, customers/clients. Often this is because you did not give the customer the information necessary to use in their presentation when relating their experience. The result may be that the customer will bad-mouth the clinic, the clinic’s presentation and the services much to the detriment of the clinic and the clinic’s services. For example, a customer came for an implant and you found that – for clinical reasons like bad oral hygiene or diabetes – the customer should have a partial denture (just a mere example); then your customer needs to know precisely why you cannot perform the required service and explain clearly your strong reasons. Or if you find that the financial status of the customer cannot afford the quality implant service that you provide, and still prefer to treat the customer using other options. You need to explain clearly to the customer why you are more expensive than other competitors and that you are selecting for him the second best alternative you can perform for him.

Conversely, customers have three obligations:

- To pay for what was received as agreed.
- To expect, and possibly demand, that everything be presented in its best possible manner.
- To complain if they don’t like the way they were treated or the way something was presented.

When a Customer comes in to complain, they are exercising their obligation to whomever is offering the idea, information, skill, service or product. When an employee receives a complaint from their supervisor, the supervisor is exercising their obligation to the employee. When management receives a complaint from their employee, the employee is exercising their obligation to their management.

No one likes complaints. If a clinic doesn’t have complaints, it’s not doing anything... and that will bring on the complaint from someone that the clinic isn’t doing anything.

An adage is, every business deserves the customers they have. By this, it is meant that when one has a demanding customer one has to understand why that person is so demanding. There could be many reasons:

- The customer does not believe they are getting “added-value” – they want to get more than they are paying for or, as with a complainer, they want to pay less, i.e., complaining with the idea that they will get their money back.
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They have a problem, they are being challenged by someone else and in order to come up with an answer to alleviate the problem they will be talking about it to the seller. This is known as the ‘squeaky wheel’ that gets the grease syndrome.

They have been sent on a mission to come back with the right (in someone else’s mind) and they believe something or someone is getting in the way. Hence, they will be “punished” for not having the information wanted.

It could be that they had “buyer’s remorse” (buyers regret) in that they could not justify their purchase without getting something additional from the dentist that would give them the “prove” to justify the purchase.

When people find that their or others’ complaints are not met, they will get even in any way they can. This could be to come in and yell where others can hear them, delay paying or not paying, telling others their side but not the dentist’s side, of the problem, story, etc.

There are many ways to handle complaints. The first thing is to let them know that not only are you listening to them, you are writing down what they are saying as they are saying it because they see you do it, and that you want them to repeat the complaint several times so you know you have it right.

If a customer keeps calling about trivial things it may be due to any of the above or it may be that doing so makes them feel that, by doing so, they are letting you know that they have confidence that you will not steer them wrong.

It may be that calling you makes them feel that they are an important customer even if you don’t think so.

While disgruntled customers may not fit this term, certainly complainers are often called “customers from hell.” Customers from hell are those that do not come in but tell hundreds of others that you are a vendor from hell. When that happens you may both meet in the same place.

Handling complaints can be outlined in four steps:

1. Make sure the complainer is sitting down. If left standing when the recipient of the complaint in interrupted or goes to look up some records the complainer will become impatient or just leave the situation. Sitting in a chair can be tantamount to having the Customer glazed to the chair.

2. If possible, do not put a telephone between the complainer and the person receiving the complaint. Doing so makes it adversarial. Selling is a partnership – and the listener before, during and after the hearing the problem is the complainer’s liaison to the organization or business. Of the customer senses that their time, effort, space or effort is being wasted, it can acerbate the problem. When one’s Customer/partner has a problem, guess who has the problem?

3. Get out a pad and pencil, ask the complainer to state the problem. Write down what they are saying as they are saying it. This has two different effects on the situation. First, the Customer’s complaint is intangible until it is put down in tangible form. By writing down all the particulars of the complaint it becomes tangible. Secondly, the listener cannot write as fast as the complainer talks, the complainer while waiting for the writer to catch up will be slowing down their presentation, hence causing a calming effect.

Get the Customer to repeat the story as many times as possible and note each change in the story. Each time, more pertinent information will come out. Very often, the complainer has been told what to say by someone else. It is their sales presentation. The person receiving the complaint is the buyer and will not buy the validity of the complaint unless they can sell the validity to someone else.

Many complaints stem from the fact that the customer was not given, in tangible form, the answers to questions they needed to answer the questions before the question(s) were asked.

4. Process the complaint as soon as possible. Let the customer know when they will be getting a reply... and get back to them before that time. If the service or Products is defective, do not argue! Make it right, right away. Do not hesitate to replace it, do it over, or give a refund.

If the reply is negative to what the complainer wants, the negative reply has to be sold to whomever the dissatisfied or disgruntled or complaining customer will be talking to.

Lastly, it is everyone’s obligation within their working or familiar environment where the problem arose to discuss the problem, the situation and the solution. This information will help others handle the problems later.

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