

The customer is

The NCC's Jo Chubb is the first point of call for any members who need assistance with a customer service issue or complaint. *The Parks Business* spoke to her about how best to handle a dissatisfied customer.

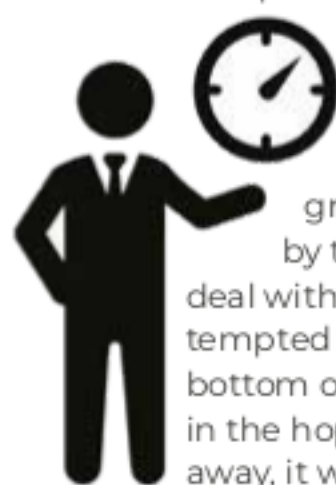
Having built a career on complaint handling, mediating and generally smoothing ruffled feathers you would think that I have seen everything and have an answer for all problems, right? Wrong!

The world of the consumer complaint can still take me by surprise and leave me scratching my head for a resolution because do you know what? Sometimes the customer isn't quite as right as they think! The skill involved in successful complaint handling is to address this without inflaming the situation or making your customer feel like an idiot... that is guaranteed to just make it worse.

Here are some top tips to help you resolve a difficult complaint with a minimum of tantrums:

1. Be timely

There is nothing that guarantees a steaming mad customer more than one who has fired off their carefully crafted complaint and receives



absolutely nothing back. Realistically, nobody likes to grab a complaint by the horns and deal with it, but don't be tempted to push it to the bottom of your to-do list in the hope that it will go away, it won't. It will just get worse, and worse...

Dealing quickly and efficiently with a complaint is crucial if you are going to stand a chance of finding a resolution, so change your priorities and put any complaints you have received at the top of your to-do list for the day.

2. Be polite



Trust me, over the years I have been shouted at, accused

everything from stupidity to fraud and called just about every name under the sun. I get it, customers are not always nice polite reasonable people when things go wrong. Nevertheless, retaliating in the same way is NEVER the best way to handle it.

When responding in writing, always draft a response first and then walk away for a couple of hours, read it again and delete or amend all the phrases that could possibly be misinterpreted or cause offence. NEVER allow your anger or frustration to transfer to your written responses – it will always make things worse.

Take time to think about how you would like to be responded to if you were the complainant and then compose the response that you would be pleased to receive. If you're not sure you can contain yourself (!) ask a colleague who you trust to take a look and provide you with a measured second opinion.

3. Be honest

We all understand the pressure of hitting targets and the excitement of an impending close on



a big sale but NEVER be tempted to mislead a prospective customer about any element of the product just to 'get them over the line'.

Mis-selling is a major cause of complaints within the industry and you and/or your company can be held liable if you are found to be engaging in this practice. This includes misleading information that is either written or verbal. You may think that something spoken can't be proven after the fact but, should a complaint escalate, a judge or adjudicator will work on a 'balance of probability' if there is no hard evidence.

If you are selling a good product that is genuinely suitable for your customer's requirements, then the truth, and your natural sales flair and enthusiasm, should be sufficient to close the deal. If not, then walk away and find the next prospective customer for whom your product will be ideal.

Although it is indisputably good practice to be open and honest, there is also a raft of consumer legislation that is in place to prevent mis-selling. There are punitive penalties in place for companies who ignore their responsibilities, meaning that a small fib at point-of-sale could escalate into something much more serious than an in-house complaint.

To ensure that you are up to speed with the risks of mis-selling or misleading customers



Dealing efficiently with a complaint is crucial if you are going to stand a chance of finding a resolution

always right?

please see the more detailed article by Peter Stonely on p30-32, which details relevant legislation and how it works in practice on a holiday park. Peter also provides some helpful advice on the best ways to avoid falling foul of this legislation.

4. Be sensible

Never get involved in a social media spat, this never ever ends well for the business! If someone has publicly posted a negative comment or review about your business, you need to get it off-line as quickly as possible by responding politely and



Never try to lie your way out of a tricky situation. You will just end up with a much more serious complaint

Remember, some people are professional online trolls and by rising to the bait, you will do untold damage to your business in a public arena. Always agree to discuss further off line and resist any temptation to 'keyboard warrior' your frustrations all over the internet!

5. Be aware

Always make sure that you are up to date with your obligations under consumer legislation – there is nothing worse than standing your ground only to find out that legally the customer has the higher ground. It's humiliating and will make it harder for you to resolve in the long term.



There are a multitude of online resources available to help you brush up on your legal obligations

and the NCC is always on hand to assist if you have a problem. We have access to Primary Authority Advice via Trading Standards and independent consumer rights experts who can help with the thornier questions. If in doubt, or if you just need a bit of reassurance, contact the members' line on 01252 336097 or email us at membership@thenc.org.uk and we will be happy to help.

Six reminders of customer service good practice

- (a) Dedicate one person or a small team of people who are suitably trained and skilled to deal with all of your complaints to ensure your responses are consistent, fair and timely.
 - (b) Always be honest and open in your dealings with your customers – from point of sale onwards.
 - (c) Make sure that all of your staff are aware of your complaints' procedure, how to handle a complaint when it arrives and who they need to escalate it to.
 - (d) Make sure that all customers are handed a copy of your complaints procedure at point of sale so that if something goes wrong they have clear instructions as to who to contact and how.
 - (e) Keep a log of all complaints received (even minor ones). This is a useful document to help identify training needs or areas where the business is consistently having issues. It can also assist your defence if the complaint escalates.
 - (f) Don't forget that the NCC offers an informal dispute resolution service (NCCIDRS) to its members. Make sure that your customers are aware of this. Once you have thoroughly investigated the complaint and done everything you can to resolve it, if you are still unable to find a solution NCCIDRS is a free service designed to re-establish communication and help to reach a satisfactory solution should your customer wish to escalate the complaint further.
- In conclusion, follow the steps above, respect your customer's opinion (even when you don't agree), be open and honest and hang on to your professionalism come what may and you will be well on the way to ensuring that even your most awkward customers turn into happy ones and hopefully go on to be valuable ambassadors for your business.