

Customer Service: Serving Customers One Crucial Conversation at a Time

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I am an executive assistant at a well-known bank. One afternoon, I picked up a courtesy call at another assistant's desk (the assistant was away at the moment). I strongly believe that if you take a call, you take full responsibility for it. So, I deal with whatever calls I come across in the best way I can.

The gentleman on the phone was having difficulty resolving an issue. I took his information and forwarded him to the department he needed. Before ending our call, I gave him my information and let him know that he could contact me if he needed to.

A short time later, he called me back. I learned he has a disability that makes it difficult for him to control his temper and that, because he had been verbally abusive to many people in the department that could help him, they were hanging up on him. This made him even angrier so he kept calling until they eventually quit taking his calls.

He was increasingly frustrated because customer service representatives had told him to fax his bills to the bank, but he couldn't because he lived more than twenty miles from a fax machine. He was also asking for dispensation and special accommodations from the bank because of his disability and the poor service he was receiving.

I kept trying to explain that in my position as an administrative assistant in an unrelated department, there was nothing I could do. He was trying to get me to admit that the bank was denying his claim. I felt backed into a corner and extremely helpless, but I still wanted to take responsibility because I had taken his call.

As his temper rose, I knew he was no longer listening to me. I also felt myself tensing up. My blood pressure rose, my face flushed, and the more he tried to get me to admit that my organization was denying his claim, the more I resisted. Even though we weren't face-to-face, it was very confrontational.

Three years ago, I attended a VitalSmarts Web seminar and have been receiving the newsletter ever since. I recognized from what I have learned from VitalSmarts that I was quickly becoming unproductive under the stress of the crucial conversation and that, because of this, I was not helping the customer.

I knew that even if there wasn't anything I could do, what I really wanted was to make my best attempt to help him and listen to him respectfully. So I said, "Sir, let's both take a step back. I'm feeling threatened and that's not going to be productive for either one of us. Let's calm down so we can resolve this problem together."

We stepped away from the emotion and stress of the situation and reassessed our mutual purpose. When I mastered my emotions and restored safety, the result was that he was pleased with the service he got from me. He felt someone had actually given him the respect he wanted and deserved, and had taken the time to listen to and help him.

At the end of the conversation he said, "If everyone else had the patience you do, I would have made so much more progress." This response made my day. I believe that as a result of my holding a crucial conversation with my best skills, this man was left with a positive impression of the company and will continue banking with my organization.

