



5 Steps of Problem Solving

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What a wonderful world it would be if everything always went right. Unfortunately, in the real world, sometimes things go a little off course. Sometimes, the entire train jumps the tracks! When problems happen, a customer service representative has the ability to use their responsibility to absolutely shine. That is, if they are given the right set of tools, and trained with the right problem solving skills. First, let's examine the thought process behind problem solving.

- **Definition of "A Problem"**

A problem is the difference between what the customer wanted to happen and what actually happened. Whether the customer's perception of what should've happened is accurate or not isn't the issue. When you address what the customer wanted to happen, you are using the technique that brings effective results.

- **Five Steps of Problem Solving**

The best approach is to use these five components, in order:

- Partnering
- Discovery
- Analysis
- Response
- Resolution

Partnering

If something went wrong, the customer is probably angry, upset, or at best, disappointed. Show the customer, early on, that they now have a partner in finding a solution. You will be their advocate. You do this by demonstrating your sincere concern. Did you know that effective communication is only 7% verbal? 38% is by your tone of voice, and 55% is through non-verbal body language! That's right, over half of what you convey is done through body language. Even on the phone, the customer can hear when you're smiling, if you are alert, or if you're distracted. Therefore, whether the customer is standing in front of you or if they are on the phone with you, your body language counts.

When a customer is angry or distraught, the best way to partner is through blending, wait time, and/or feedback.

- *Blending*-Initially, the customer sees you as the personification of the problem. Your words, tone of voice, and action must show the customer that you are on their side. Some non-threatening, but non-committal, early phrases to use include: “Oh, my.....” “Please, tell me what happened” and “I’m sure we can sort it out” and “I’d like to help you with that.”
- *Wait Time*-If something went wrong, chances are the person calling you is being held responsible on their end. They feel let down and may need to vent. Give them time to do so. Let them get it all out on the table, while you pick out the facts to address later. Give them compassion and understanding during their wait time.
- *Feedback*- Repeat the information the customer has presented, deleting exaggerating adjectives, and retaining the pertinent information. Feedback assures that you understand what the customer said and that the customer said what he meant. In the heat of frustration, many customers may use incorrect terminology. Saying “I’m sorry” could be interpreted as accepting the entire responsibility for the problem. Wait until you’ve gone through the discovery and analysis phases to know whether an apology is warranted.

Discovery

The most important factor in solving problems is diagnosing the problem. Don’t assume you know what it is. Listen with a third ear, separating symptoms from real issues. If you don’t hear well, you can get a hearing aid! If you don’t listen well, there’s no cure and you should not be in the customer service business. Be sure you are hearing the right person-the customer, not you. Rather than thinking about what you’ll say next to dazzle them, listen to what they are saying. That will give you the basis to respond well.

Analysis

Ask questions that will lead to solutions. Find out, who, when, where, how and why. Don’t allow yourself to get into a defensive mode. You didn’t do it. But as a person committed to giving awesome customer service, you have the burden of representing your company in a positive light.

In this process, use the customer as an ally. Ask questions that reveal what kind of resolution the customer might be seeking. Decide whether this is something you can arrange, or whether you need to call in a higher authority or whether you need more facts. If you have to get back to the customer, do so in no more than 24 hours even if the answer is to report that you are still investigating. You must let them know they aren’t forgotten! The analysis may take research and detecting on your part. Don’t attempt to solve the problem before knowing all the facts.

Response

This part is really important. It is your response to the problem before you enter into the resolution stage. Think about responses that have brought you positive reactions.

Practice responses with other peers. Ask your supervisor for suggestions, or to help you determine why a certain response is not well accepted.

Resolution

Resolution is probably the easiest part for the customer service rep. You have policies that can be applied; rules to go by. At Trinity, our team members are empowered to take action, and there is always someone to turn to if we don't know how to resolve the issue. Within this framework, it's important to know what kinds of resolution are most effective.

Here are four of the most memorable kinds of customer service resolutions you can offer:

- Make it right
- Save the customer \$
- Make the customer \$
- Make the customer feel good

You have an advantage. The further you are from a problem, the easier it is to resolve. The customer is too close to see obvious solutions. You can become the hero by suggesting them.

Be assertive. Take ownership of the problem. Rather than transferring the customer to half a dozen people, take the initiative to find out the details, the process, or whatever will resolve the issue.

Congratulations, you're now ready for enhanced problem solving to deliver awesome customer service. Now here's your quiz.

What's the one thing a customer never forgives?

The correct answer is "Indifference". No matter what the problem is, the customer can eventually forgive the error or have it made up to them if you've followed the steps above. What they will never forgive is indifference; not listening and not caring.

In customer service, if you have the right attitude and a spirit of service, you will be a success. Your attitude, not your aptitude will determine your altitude. The extra mile is never crowded. There's room there for you and your customers both.