

## A Field Guide to Patrons !

### Tips for keeping customers happy .....

In the mighty jungle, a run-in with a wild animal is certainly cause for alarm. But customers are rarely so treacherous. Even a customer with his claws out can be tamed with some thoughtful diplomacy and understanding. Here, we define the types of customers you're most likely to encounter and how best to turn their growls of anger into purrs of satisfaction.

Keeping some customers happy can feel like wrestling a hungry tiger. Instead of letting them devour you and your profits, learn how to have them eating out of your hand.

# A Field Guide to Patrons



## The Bully



.You'll quickly recognize the **Bully Customer** by the red face, clenched fists (or pointing fingers) and high-decibel roar.

"Usually when they are the bullying kind of customer, someone along the way hasn't kept on top of things," says Louise Anderson, author of *Cream of the Corp.*, and president of Anderson Performance Improvement, a consultant firm in Hastings, Minn. For better or for worse, it's now up to you or your employee to smooth things over. And fast.

"Deal with them as quickly as possible," advises Eileen Soisson, president of The Meeting Institute in Myrtle Beach, S.C. "They're like taking off a Band-Aid. The slower you do it, the more painful."

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS



*Sportsplex Operators & Developers Association*

{ continued }

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

With these customers, keen listening skills especially come in handy.

"If someone comes to me with a raised voice, do I then raise my voice in return?" asks Karen Carnabucci, MSS, LCSW, consultant and owner of Companions in Healing in Racine, Wis. You might be tempted, but you'll only escalate the situation further if you respond defensively.

"What may seem natural or normal is often not productive or helpful," Carnabucci says.

If it seems necessary, first find a place where the customer and you can speak in private.

"The number-one thing is to pull them away from the situation," Soisson says. Then, open your ears.

"Make every effort to let the person have his or her say," Carnabucci adds. If you're not sure what the customer wants, ask questions or paraphrase with statements like, "Let me make sure I heard this correctly." Mostly, though, just listen.

"If I had to pass along one simple piece of advice, it would be to come to recognize the incredible value of silence," agrees Bill Lynott, former customer relations director at Sears, Eastern Territory. Lynott insists this technique works with nearly any type of customer, as long as you follow two rules.

"First, make absolutely certain you let the customer talk themselves out," he says. This is easier said than done.

"It's really counterintuitive," he says. Your tendency is going to be to interrupt and set the customer straight on whatever he's going on about. But hold your tongue. If you'd like to comment on something the customer has said, jot it down or make a mental note to go back to it later, then continue to let them talk.

"Let them talk and talk—there will be pauses, but don't say anything," Lynott adds. "The silence is powerful."

The second part also requires some restraint.

"Once the customer is thoroughly talked out, and you've used the power of silence to what you feel is the maximum, then you say, 'What would you like me to do for you?'"

The potential answer may frighten you more than the customer himself, but you'll soon realize the bark was worse than the request.

{ continued }

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

"You think the customer is going to ask for something outrageous, but nine times out of 10, the request is less than you were prepared to give," Lynott says. "I've done this, and it works like a charm. The most difficult customer in the world softens themselves up by talking themselves out."

In fact, sometimes, the customer won't want anything at all. They just want to vent, and once done venting, they're happy.

While the customer is enjoying her vent-session, keep in mind this insightful point: "Anger is really a disguise for something quite different, and that is fear," says Jill Griffin, author of *Customer Loyalty: How to Earn it, How to Keep It* and owner of the Austin, Texas-based Griffin Group. The fear could stem from a number of issues.

"Fear of being taken advantage of or appearing foolish in front of family or friends," Griffin says. By recognizing this basic human emotion, an employee has a completely different perspective and understanding—and an advantage to help keep the Bully at bay.

### ~ *The Bully Caveat* ~

**W**hile calming the customer is important, it's not always entirely possible. If you feel that a customer may become abusive, then your safety and that of your employees is more important than satisfying the customer. Rather than pulling them aside, you should stay where other people can see you. If you're serving alcohol at your facility, pay particular attention to aggressive customers.

Also, make sure you set some boundaries. While the customer deserves respect, it doesn't mean letting the customer walk all over you. For example, if someone starts cursing, you might say, "I'd like to continue this discussion, but I can't if you're going to use foul language."

"There is a line you establish," says Jill Griffin, author of *Customer Loyalty: How to Earn it, How to Keep It*. If you've already allowed the customer to go past that line, and you're at the brink of being abused, then you have to take measures to end the discussion as tactfully as possible, she stresses.

{ continued }

{ continued }



## The High-Maintenance Customer

# A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

You'll spot the High-Maintenance Customer because, well, they make themselves pretty well known around the place. You may know them by name, or if not, you will soon. But what to do about them?

In general, a little extra attention goes a long way with these customers.

"If you stroke them and schmooze them, they'll be so happy, that they'll soon be your low-maintenance customer," Soisson says.

You could even go to the extent of letting those customers know you know they're high-maintenance.

"Pat yourself on the back in front of them," Soisson says. For example, after asking for five things upon arriving at your facility, follow up with them, make sure all requests were met and conclude with a "Great. I'm so glad we got everything done for you."

Specifically identifying your potential high-maintenance customers can bestow great rewards. It may sound morally improper, but good business sense says that the customers who spend more are worth the extra TLC because they'll continue to spend more.

"We've done a disservice to paint the picture that we treat all customers equally," Griffin says. "There are some customers who, based on their buying history, have earned their way to a certain level. High-maintenance may be absolutely acceptable if that customer falls into the appropriate high-profit category."

If you're running a campground, for example, and a certain, get-me-this-get-me-that family has been spending its summer vacations with you for the past nine years, reserving several sites and buying all their groceries at your general store, then maybe a little bonus here and there is warranted.

Rather than disregard or even poke fun at these customers, take the time to get to know them better and view your facility from their perspective: If you were spending a lot of money somewhere and spending often, you might expect, at the very least, the best customer service possible. Griffin suggests creating a way to tier your services that actually accommodates these customers without losing money on them.

{ continued }

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

"If a customer wants additional benefits, they can pay for them because they're in that category, and they've earned their way in," she explains. New customers might have the option to buy their way into the higher category.

"Shrewd business operators have figured this out," Griffin says. She offers the example of a major casino chain that consistently receives more requests for hotel rooms than they can satisfy. The company also has realized that it's not selling hotel rooms, it's selling access to its gambling facility.

"They can pinpoint, through gambling history, whether the customer is appropriate to make a reservation for," she explains. So, before sending your high-maintenance customers to the dog house, consider giving them that extra treat after all.



### ~ Top 10 Steps to Top-Notch Service ~

1. When you feel a difficult situation coming, take a deep breath.
2. Give the customer the benefit of the doubt.
3. Listen to what the person is trying to tell you.
4. Acknowledge the issue the customer has raised.
5. Offer your help to resolve the issue.
6. If the customer is angry, offer somewhere to speak privately (unless your safety is compromised).
7. Respect the customer and expect the customer's respect.
8. Remember that silence is a powerful tool.
9. If the customer gets abusive, end the discussion diplomatically.
10. After-the-fact, discuss the situation with peers and superiors: what went well or wrong.

{ continued }



## The Best Friend

# A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

The **Best Friend Customers** are a special breed. They hang around. A lot. They even follow your employees.

"We call them Social Sallys," Soisson says. "When it's slow, they're the best, but not when it's busy."

It might be fun for a time, but after that, these puppies begin to take time and energy away from other customers or from work that needs to get done. And then it's time to give them a pat on the head and send them on their way.

"There are ways to set boundaries that are both polite and graceful," Carnabucci says. The main idea is to offer a closing to the conversation. Exactly what you say depends on your personality. You might be straightforward or use humor. Carnabucci suggests: "Nice chatting with you, now I need to input this data, check in these customers,' whatever it is. Or 'My boss is looking over my shoulder, gotta go.'"

To prevent the customer from feeling disappointed or rejected, keep the focus on them, Anderson says. Ask if there's anything you can do to help. If you're actually providing them a service—a tennis lesson, a training session—and their chit-chat is chewing time, gently remind them of this. On the other hand, Soisson suggests, they may just want to pay to talk to you.

"Maybe they never get to be heard at home, and this is their time," she says. "You can humor the person as well as making her happy."

Also, don't take on the Best Friend as your own. Let other staff members know what's happening.

"Communicate it to other employees, so they'll take a hint when they see this customer coming in," Carnabucci advises. "Maybe there's a signal that alerts another employee to call you over. Cooperation is important among employees."

Another way to look at the Best Friend is as a loyal ally.

"You might be able to turn that affinity for the schmoozing into a benefit for the person and the [facility]," Griffin suggests. "Maybe this person can be turned into a new-member welcoming role. Make them more a member of the club, so to speak."



{ continued }

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS



### The Something-for-Nothing Customer

Sometimes a customer isn't looking for service but a swindle. They plan to get away with something, preferably for free. These are the Something-for-Nothing Customers. They often exhibit similar characteristics to the Bully, but they have a glimmer in their eye: The SFNs come with a purpose. Oh, these types can be frustrating.

Like the Bullies, you want to take these people aside to talk, if possible.

"If he's asking for something for free, there are five people behind him taking notes," Soisson says. So, be prepared with facts.

"Your staff better be trained on all policies and why they exist," Soisson says. Like if it rains all week at your golf resort, and someone comes to you demanding another week for free. Your policy probably explains that inclement weather is not grounds for a refund, and your staff can simply and sweetly fall back on that.

On the other hand, be prepared to give a little.

"Sometimes these people just want something, anything," Soisson says. Empower your staff to have some offers at-the-ready that keep the peace but don't cost too much.

"For example, an hour of free court time doesn't lose you money, but an hour massage would," Soisson points out.

If this customer is one who's been known to hoodwink you in the past, then it's time to put a stop to it. Speak to the person and consider banning the person from your facility. Still, be careful not to over-react.

"These situations have to be examined case by case," Carnabucci says, though every circumstance, of course, must be handled with professionalism and courtesy.

"Sometimes we have to give the customer the benefit of the doubt," adds Griffin, pointing out that word-of-mouth can go both ways. She recommends facilities create a system that makes it easy to trust your customers, while also verifying what they're telling you. It might be a policy of requiring a receipt to return pro-shop merchandise or a confirmation number to prove a reservation.



{ continued }

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

"I'd rather go a little bit out there, hoping they're trustworthy, as opposed to making a snap judgment, which can do more harm than good," Griffin adds. Of course, if you suspect foul play, you don't have to encourage these customers to come back.

"There's a subtle happy medium in there," she says.

### ~ From Complaint to Compliment ~

All too often, managers view criticism as a negative, while, in fact, it can be extremely helpful.

"This is feedback for the organization," says Karen Carnabucci, MSS, LCSW, owner of Companions in Healing. If complaints are documented, you may notice that there are a bunch that concern one area of your facility or services. Maybe a policy needs to be reviewed, or your marketing tactics are misleading.

"There may be a policy overall that needs to be changed," Carnabucci says. "Some companies pay thousands and thousands of dollars to get user feedback, and you're getting this feedback for free."

Use it to your advantage.



**W**hen you don't hear a peep one way or another from a certain customer, you may have a Walker in your midst.

"The Walker leaves a restaurant and then says the service was terrible, and they didn't like their meal, but they still leave a 15 percent tip and don't say anything at the time," Soisson explains. "They don't emotionally connect with their experience."

This may seem harmless, but if these people don't tell you about their experience, they'll be telling all their friends, who tell all their friends, and pretty soon, word-of-mouth leaves a bad taste.

Similarly, if these customers actually fully enjoy themselves, you won't know about it and therefore won't be able to build on that goodwill. Soisson urges to preempt the Walker's stealthy behavior by creating those connections for them.



{ continued }

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

"Extend a personal greeting to them," Soisson says. "Instead of 'Hello, goodbye, see you next time,' get to know their names," she says. Remember this poignant remark that Soisson refers to from Dale Carnegie: "The sweetest sound in any language is a person's own name."

In her position as recreation director at a Florida Keys resort, Soisson mandated that her employees spend 15 minutes of what she called "guest time" before beginning their regular duties. They would walk around the facility and introduce themselves to people, saying hello, telling the guest their name, and asking for the guests' names in return.

"Then, at least once during they day, they were required to check back with those people to see how they were doing," Soisson says. To any staff members who complained, she reminded them that their relationships could have profitable consequences.

"That could be the customer who tips you later or, when it comes to filling out a comment card, your name is in the forefront of their minds," she says.

Not all Walkers will want to be chatted up, though.

"Some Walkers like to be left alone, and if they're happy, then they're the customer who you don't need to spend much time or money on, and that's fine," Soisson says. The bottom line is you need to feel them out.

"You should be able to tell by how they respond to you," she says. "If they give you one-word answers, then they're probably the type to leave alone. Just give them good service."

Good service might mean something different than you once thought, and you might need to un-learn the old "gold standard," which instructed you to treat customers the way you'd like to be treated.

"The attitude is changing, and it's more of a platinum standard," Soisson explains. "Treat others the way they want to be treated."

### GUIDE TO THE GUIDE

While creating labels can be helpful, it's important to remember that appearances can sometimes be deceiving and not to make snap judgments. Take the case of the Myrtle Beach Bike Week, which attracts more than 300,000 motorcycle enthusiasts.

"A new customer service staff member might snub their noses at these people when they walk in," Soisson says. "But these customers spend a lot of money; they're huge for our tourism industry."

{ continued }

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

So it's worth it to give everyone the benefit of the doubt before dismissing them.

"Get to know the difference between stereotyping and using your experience to understand how to respond to someone," Soisson advises. Arm yourself and your employees with knowledge, confidence and good examples, and you'll be ready for anything.

*Now, go get 'em, tiger.*

### ~ Training and Tricks ~

**ROLE-PLAYING** The number-one technique for teaching staff how to tame the wild customer is through regularly scheduled role-playing. Experts agree this helps prepare employees for all situations.

"Sometimes when we're faced with a situation that's new, we get the deer-in-the-headlights look," says consultant Karen Carnabucci, MSS, LCSW. Role-playing allows staff to preempt such moments by practicing in a safe setting.

**KNOWLEDGE** "What knowledge does it take to be able to serve the customer?" asks Louise Anderson, author of *Cream of the Corp*. Employees should be armed with knowledge, not only about their slice of the facility, but of the entire facility, so when they're called on by a customer to help, fix a problem, resolve a conflict, they'll be ready.

**BEST PRACTICES** "Keep track of your own best practices," Anderson says. If one employee has dealt with a prickly customer, talk about what happened. Was it resolved successfully? If not, what could be done better? If so, make sure all your employees know what worked.

"Encourage employees to make it a learning experience," Anderson adds.

**STABILITY** When a customer makes you angry, your blood pressure will probably kick up a notch or two. Carnabucci offers two simple techniques to staying in control: First, breathe.

"It literally brings more oxygen to your brain and helps you think more clearly," she says. "After that, consciously soften your feet and imagine you're sending roots from your feet to the earth."

Sound hokey? Well, give it a try, and consider this:

**"We can't stabilize someone else until we stabilize ourselves," Carnabucci says. "It's simple, and no one will know you're doing it."**

{ continued }

{ continued }

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

**REWARD** Good customer service should be applauded and perhaps even rewarded. Some organizations create a point system.

"Employees accumulate points for providing good customer service," Anderson explains. You can recognize individuals at team meetings and get peers to recognize each other as well. It could be for something as simple as smiling and greeting customers as they enter the facility.

"Everybody likes to be recognized—young, old, wealthy, poor, union, independent," Anderson says. It'll make your employees happy, and happy employees create an atmosphere your customers will enjoy.

**RELEASE** It's draining, maybe even maddening, to remain calm and collected while dealing with an irate or otherwise difficult customer. The employees should have their own outlet for venting.

"People need a chance to recover from their experiences and process them," Carnabucci says. "It could just mean walking into the office and having a good scream." Or maybe stamping your feet in private, just getting out the negative energy. A cool-down should be allowed and even encouraged.

## A FIELD GUIDE TO PATRONS

### TIPS FOR KEEPING CUSTOMERS HAPPY



{ continued }

## **BONUS Article**

### **Ready, Aim, Hire !**

Your front-line employees often set the vibe for your venue, and you want it to be a positive one. But maintaining that attitude can sometimes test even the best. Beginning with a strong staff can help keep customers happy in the end.

"When we look at the business aspect of it, hiring is certainly important," says Karen Carnabucci, MSS, LCSW, owner of Companions in Healing in Racine, Wis. "People skills are valuable."

When interviewing candidates, it's important to choose those who are most likely to succeed in dealing with every type of customer who enters your facility.

Carnabucci offers some matters to consider:

- \* How does the person present him or herself?
- \* Does the person converse easily?
- \* Does the person seem to listen to the questions being asked?
- \* Is the person giving one-size-fits-all answers, rather than genuine answers?
- \* Does the person seem to like people?
- \* Does the person have life experiences that would relate to the job?
- \* If the person doesn't have good skills or there are certain circumstances the person finds difficult, is there training?

Carnabucci also encourages asking for references and asking situational questions. For example:

"Ask the person being interviewed, 'Do you remember a time when you were really challenged by a situation?' If they can provide an example and show how they dealt with it well, that's good," Carnabucci says. "Or, they might say, 'I didn't handle it that well, but I learned from that experience and would do it differently next time.' The person would earn extra points if they could come up with an example when they did, in fact, handle it differently."

Also, it's important for you to adequately inform the candidate about the responsibilities of the job. Describe what a typical day might entail, Carnabucci suggests.

"Then, the person being interviewed will have a good sense of whether the job is right for them," she says. And you will have a more prepared and better qualified staff.