

How to Handle Difficult Customers

by Andy Deyo

In the ice skating business, service is the only product we have to offer. Good ice, quality instruction, good food, clean surroundings and an attentive staff make a skating operation successful, and customer service is key. Customer service means delivering the highest quality product, demonstrating a strong sense of community, and providing clear and accurate information about our programs while maintaining a willingness to listen to our patrons.

Acquiring and training an exceptional staff is the first step in meeting customer service goals. Your staff represents your facility and to do so appropriately they must be trained in good customer service, including strategies for dealing with difficult patrons.

Be grateful for disgruntled customers. If handled correctly, they could become your most loyal customers. The following are steps to converting difficult customers into loyal patrons.

Keep Your Cool

- If you're right, there is no reason to lose your temper.
- If you're wrong, you can't afford to lose your temper.
- Don't let yourself be put on the defensive.
- Don't argue.

Hints: Get on the same physical level; get a comfortable distance from the person; make eye contact; don't take criticism personally; listen for information.

Listen with Empathy for Facts

- Look for areas of agreement.
- Respond with feeling; don't treat the situation as routine.
- Ask questions; be an empathic listener.

Hints: Take notes if appropriate; nod your head if you want the customer to continue. Paraphrase important points. Ask, "Do I have that correct?"

Take Action to Solve the Problem

- Give the customer several options if possible.
- If you, your facility or staff are at fault ... APOLOGIZE profusely.
- Respond in positives instead of negatives.
- If you can't solve the problem, refer the customer to someone who can. Take the customer's name and phone number and direct them to a supervisor.

Hint: Instead of saying, "There are no more public skating sessions today," say, "We have one starting tomorrow at"

Bring the Incident to a Polite Close

- Ask, “Is there anything else I can help you with today?”
- A customer who has the passion to be angry also has the passion to be loyal.
- Quiet customers walk away; angry customers give us a second chance.
- Follow up when appropriate.
- Thank the customer.

Don't Expect to Win Them All

- A small percentage of people are impossible to satisfy.
- If a customer refuses to calm down, calmly state the facts.

Hint: Keep in mind the following quote from Elliot Hubbard: “Every man is a damn fool for at least five minutes out of every day. Wisdom consists of not exceeding the limit.”

Dealing with angry or upset people takes self-control, practice and confidence in yourself and the product you deliver. Successful handling of difficult situations makes the difference between being average and being extraordinary. **BE EXTRAORDINARY!!!**