

Converting the Ballistic Customer Into An Advocate Using The “ALWAYS Sandwich©” Angry Customers Engagement Formula

The stories abound relating to every customer that comes to you upset and there can be many more just like them that are not coming forth. And those that don't come forth cannot be engaged and satisfied. Satisfied customers are more inclined to be repeat customers than an upset customer will be.

Some surveys indicate as many as eleven (Rule 1/11) other customers can have like discrepancies (FORUM Corp. research) with you and will not tell you, for every one that actually comes forward. And compounding this are estimates and varying surveys that also indicate that for every one upset customer that you have, that comes to you and leaves still upset due to lack of attention and engagement, they may tell upwards of two dozen (Rule 1/24) other people of their perceived horrific experience with “you!”

Rule 1/11 and Rule 1/24 Can Work Against Your Organization, and Rule 1/0 Can Grow You!

Engaging an upset customer, maintaining control of that conversation and striving for a healthy resolution is the challenge. With a controlled engagement approach, success can be attained more often than not. Converting an initially upset customer into an advocate can become a norm. Some surveys indicate by doing this you greatly increase the retention of the customer and decrease greatly the likelihood that they may feel compelled to share anything unflattering about you with others (Rule 1/0). In fact, they may even share with those closest to them the positive outcome you bestowed upon them!

So, converting that ballistic or upset customer into one which you can engage and address their needs, in an attempt to keep them as a customer, is both an art and a science.

Psychology reveals that what may have caused a customer to attain the level of negativity which they are exhibiting is caused by typically three factors:

1. A feeling or belief that they are not being *ACKNOWLEDGED*. Thus, to get acknowledged, they must exhibit an otherwise undesirable behavioral pattern.
2. A feeling or belief that no one will assume *OWNERSHIP* of their issue, and that they are being passed off from one contact to another. Thus to get someone to take ownership, they must exhibit an otherwise undesirable behavioral pattern.
3. A feeling or belief that nothing will be *DONE* on the issue being raised to the service provider. Thus to get anything done/fixed/resolved, they must exhibit an otherwise undesirable behavioral pattern.

So given this powerful insight, your engagement approach for ballistic and upset customers should chronologically speak to each of these psychological motivators. The “ALWAYS Sandwich© Angry Customers” Formula allows you to do precisely this – whether face-to-face, one-on-one, in group dynamics, via email and correspondence or over the telephone.

The “ALWAYS” acronym and portion of the formula serves as the first engagement step and allows you to simply create a conducive engagement environment to get all of the players involved to engage civilly.

Using the letters of the acronym, you facilitate a dialogue and manage your behavior in a very controlled and systematic manner.

STEP ONE Engagement Approach = ALWAYS:

1. **A = Apologize** in an emphatic manner and transition into a Q&A sequence.
2. **L = Listen** intently to the customer and increase your comprehension by physically taking notes of the key items for action response. This also decreases your ability of interrupting them and escalating emotions.
3. **W = Write down** only the key items for your response. Omit all of the superficial elements and emotion-based subject matter. Resolution of the customer complaint is the primary objective and a victory over name-calling is not.
4. **A = Apologize** again as you now transition from listening to them to now responding calmly to them. This second apology statement serves as a transition phase and also sends a signal to them that you are ACKNOWLEDGING what they have brought to your attention. You are also assuming OWNERSHIP of what they have presented, and now you wish to present to them your position as to what can be DONE to address their concerns.
5. **Y = Your Name** should be immediately used in a way that, as you begin to respond, they hear someone has assumed OWNERSHIP for them and ensuring you will work with them. This will begin to powerfully diffuse any possible escalation in negativity and reduce continued tension between them and create more of an “us” mentality.
6. **S = Summarize** their points now in the conversational response flow and detail ways to address what they have brought to you.

The ALWAYS portion of the “ALWAYS Sandwich Angry Customers” Formula may sound like this, as a script:

1. ALW(ays) = “I am sorry that you have had the situation that you have mentioned, please tell me exactly what happened, let me take notes while you explain, and then let’s see how we can address this for you.”
2. (alw)AYS = “Based upon what you have detailed for me, there are a few ways we can proceed. Let me explain...”

In responding to the ballistic or upset customer, you now marry this first step with the second step, which is the SANDWICH part of the over-all formula.

By taking detailed mental and physical notes, you can now respond (SUMMARIZE) by taking everything that you have gathered and rebuild it into a smooth conversational flow, as if you were laying out all of the necessary ingredients before you to build a sandwich to eat.

STEP TWO Engagement Approach = SANDWICH:

1. POSITIVE - Start your response with something that you can immediately address, take action, resolve, and eliminate, etc. (Your base piece of bread in this sandwich analogy as the first ingredient to your response.)
2. NEGATIVE – Then, transition onward to that piece which may be laden with controversy, negativity or unpleasant. (The middle piece of response to this sandwich analogy.)
3. POSITIVE - End with or on a positive note. Transition immediately after matter-of-factly addressing the negative or middle portion of the dialogue (whether verbal or written) onward to a positive item. And if there are no items uncovered in your questioning and note-taking phase of this interaction that can be used as a positive ending, then end with a simple question that solicits more business. (... “Outside of this item, is there anything else we can be doing for you?”)

The SANDWICH response portion of the “ALWAYS Sandwich© Angry Customers” formula may sound like this, as a script:

1. POSITIVE - “In looking at these items, one thing that we can immediately do to address this is to, _____.”
2. NEGATIVE - “In looking at this item, we are precluded by _____, and although I would like to do something, as you can see we cannot.”
3. POSITIVE - “On this other item we may also be able to do something here, may I ask you a few additional questions, _____?”

4. Alternative POSITIVE - “Outside of these first two items, is there anything else we can do for you today?”

If the upset customer feels compelled after attempting a conversational flow with the SANDWICH formula, to digress back to the second ingredient where you attempted to dispense with the negative feelings, your response should be that of a smooth broken record. Replay the precise controlled, professional response you gave them the first time.

Customer Perception and Problem Situations

Most customers have low expectations when they give a company feedback. The way they see it, it's the company *against* them. From the customer's perspective, which is based on untold poor experiences with companies and complaints, it's as if there's a large brick wall placed in the center of the floor. On one side of the wall is the dissatisfied customer, who has experienced a problem, and on the other side of the wall, is the company. The problem the customer has experienced is on the same side of the wall as the company. From where the customer stands, it appears that the company is defending the problem (by quoting policy, placing blame, giving excuses etc.) and the two are joined together *against* the customer. This, of course, isn't how companies set out to make customers feel. It is, however, perception, and **perception is reality**, when it comes to our customers. This is the only perception that matters from the customer's perception.

Given the customer's perception of companies and service providers in problem situations, it's no small wonder that some customers will respond with anger and explosive verbal attacks when they feel they have been wronged.

The Reality of Problem Situations

Customers are right to think there is a barrier present in complaint situations. However, the situation is *not* the company defending the problem and working against the customer. On one side of the barrier, and let's call this barrier a fence instead of a wall, is the customer. On the other side of the fence is the problem. The company is standing on the same side of the fence as the customer, not with the problem. The company and customer are actually standing face to face, and they work together—communicating, brainstorming, and finding win-win solutions. The problem is the *problem*. The problem is not the customer. The problem is not the company. Yet many customers walk away from complaint situations feeling they are the problem and that the company's only objective was to “protect” policy.

Customers must feel you are their advocates, not adversaries. When customers feel you are their advocates, it is much easier to diffuse anger, reach win-win resolutions and maintain the customer's loyalty. The next two sections offer field-tested strategies for responding to ballistic customers in such a way that not only diffuses anger, but it also ensures that customers feel that the company is on their side throughout the problem resolution process.

Using the Principles of the Martial Art “Aikido” to Calm a Ballistic Customer

In my Customer Recovery programs, we demonstrate the martial art, Aikido, with a volunteer and then encourage participants to begin to practice “Verbal Aikido” with ballistic, demanding, and unreasonable customers. The martial art Aikido can be used to help customer Service Leaders more confidently and effectively respond to ballistic customers. Aikido students are taught to blend with the other person’s energy so that energy doesn’t knock them over and then to channel that energy into the direction they choose. Aikido is unique in that it is a non-violent martial art that never meets force with force. Using six principles of Aikido, customer service professionals can diffuse anger and demonstrate amazing control over all aspects of verbal attacks from demanding, irate, or unreasonable customers.

1. An Aikidoist strategically calms down the attack. This is done by both the use of relaxed body posture and open hands. Verbal attacks from irate customers also need the same calming strategy. In Aikido, the master will step aside rather than confront the attack. This takes the power and speed out of the attack and allows the master to stay centered and calm. When you respond to your customer with *“Clearly, we’ve upset you and getting to the bottom of this is just as important to me as it is to you,”* anger begins to dissipate. You’ve addressed the anger directly and non- defensively. You haven’t been pulled into the drama of the attack.

2. Aikido never meets force with force. In fact, there are no direct attacks and very little striking or kicking. When dealing with angry customers it is natural to respond to an attack with an attack. If the customer yells, we escalate our voice. When the attack gets personal, we become defensive and less willing to work with the customer. While we may feel justified in launching our attack because we’ve been attacked, we must realize that a defensive (forceful) response only escalates the original problem. Let’s learn from the Aikido masters and not attack back *defensively*. Instead, we will respond carefully and strategically.

3. Aikido emphasizes quick, decisive movements that are designed to use the attacker's force against him. This is done through evasive movements, body shifting, and leverage. Taking this to a verbal level, you’d take a customer’s intensity and sense of urgency and use that to your advantage with a reply like: *“No question, we’ve messed up. Getting to the bottom of this is just as important to me as it is to you.”* Instead of letting the customer’s intimidation tactics negatively impact you, you turn that energy back at the customer by pacing his actions.

4. Aikido’s blend with their opponent’s energy. In Aikido, this looks as if you move toward your opponent and then change places with them. In a verbal attack, blending with your customer is finding common ground with the customer. You can blend with your angry customer by listening with a sincere intent to understand their pain, frustration and needs and then responding with empathy.

The knowledge you gain from listening to your customer becomes your force and positions you to redirect the energy in a productive direction. Once you've blended with the customer, that is, once you truly understand the customer's situation, the attack can be neutralized and redirected.

5. Aikido students learn to turn with their opponent's force and let that force go past them. When we respond to angry customers in this way, we're able to keep our cool when customers get hot. We don't get caught up in the emotion of anger. Instead, we allow the customer to express his feelings, and we don't take comments personally. We don't allow our feelings (anger, rejection, offense) to control our responses.

6. In Aikido, all opponents are considered partners. Think of your angry customer as your partner, and let this mindset direct you to use interactive dialogue to work *with* your customer to solve the problem. Try to not resist or coerce your "partner." Work with your partner, talk with your partner, and seek solutions that benefit the customer and the company.

Applying the principles of Aikido to difficult situations with ballistic customers allows Service Leaders to maintain composure and control, and effectively diffuse anger.

Five Ways to Influence Customer Behavior in Tough Situations

When dealing with the ballistic customer, it never hurts to be skilled in the art of persuasion. In 1936, Dale Carnegie wrote *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to "help readers get along with and influence people in everyday, business and social contacts."

In the *How to Win People to Your Way of Thinking* section, Carnegie offers creative and practical strategies for responding to complaints by learning how to effectively use influence. Using influence with upset customers is not to manipulate customers or to present an insincere response. It is instead, knowing exactly what not to do and say and what to do and say. Here's a brief summary of Carnegie's pointers for influencing and winning customers to our way of thinking in complaint situations.

1. Realize you can't win an argument with your customer.

Certainly, you can prove your point and even have the last word, "*you may be right, but as far as changing your customer's mind is concerned, you will probably be just as futile as if you were wrong.*" Your goal in complaint situations is to retain the customer, not to be right. If you win the argument, you may very well have lost the customer. Carnegie encourages us to carefully consider some hard questions before going to battle with customers: "*Is my reaction one that will relieve the problem, or will it just relieve frustration? Will my reaction drive my customer further away? What price will I pay if I win (the argument)?*" Carnegie advises, "*The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it.*" By the way, customers will spread negative word-of-mouth advertising to 50 people if they get into argument with you!

2. Apologize for your mistakes.

We cannot emphasize enough the importance of apologizing to customers in problem situations and especially when customers demonstrate a “ballistic” temperament. In a recent consumer survey, 50% of customers who voiced complaints to an organization said they never received an apology. If the company is wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically. This will help you disarm your angry customer and reduce defensiveness. We also encourage customer service professionals to apologize even when they are not at fault. An apology does not have to be an admission of fault. It can be offered to express regret. For example, *“I’m so sorry for any inconvenience this misunderstanding has caused you.”*

3. Never tell a customer they are wrong.

You will be smart to never tell a customer s/he is wrong or mistaken. Telling a person they are wrong arouses opposition and will make the customer want to battle with you. (Ever tell your spouse they are wrong?) Carnegie points out an indisputable fact, *“It’s difficult, under even the most benign conditions to change people’s minds.”* So why make it harder by starting out on the wrong foot? If you know your customer is wrong, it’s better to start off saying, *“I thought the contract read otherwise, but let’s take a look.”*

4. Begin in a friendly way – you catch more bees with honey.

Avoid starting out on the defense or speaking with an authoritative tone as if you have to prove the customer wrong. Even when the customer is wrong, this is not an appropriate response. Beginning in a friendly way means hearing the customer out, allowing venting time and showing respect, even when your final answer is no.

5. Get a yes, yes response.

When talking with your customer, begin by emphasizing the things on which you agree. Dale Carnegie urges us to get the person saying yes and keeping them, if possible, from saying “no.” When a person says “no,” all of their pride demands that they remain consistent with themselves. The diplomatic communicator builds a psychological path toward an affirmative response by strategically getting their “opponent” to say “yes” a number of times. For example, you could approach a situation this way: *“Sir. You signed and agreed to the terms of the agreement and are, therefore, responsible for...”* This statement, while true, will certainly only incite an already upset customer. A more diplomatic approach might start this way: *“Would it be fair to say that you signed and accepted this contract?” (Yes.) And do you agree that when one signs a contract, it becomes a legal and binding*

document?” (Yes.) What you’ve done here is brought your customer to a rational agreement with you and from here you can move into problem solving.

Your goal in problem situations with ballistic customers (or any customer for that matter) is not to be right and not to just resolve the problem, but to have everyone feel better about the problem that occurred and to **KEEP THE CUSTOMER**. The principles of Aikido and the five strategies presented here will help you do just that.

Most upset customers have been conditioned by previously ineffective customer service providers that, if they beat them up enough, others would capitulate. As a “Service-Leader” you are not going to play by these old corrosive behaviors.

The “Service-Leader” engages the customer, rather happy or upset, and collaboratively engages them for resolution and lasting transactions and success!