

Guidance for CCHD Staff: Dealing with Difficult or Abusive Customers

Source: Valuation Office Agency

<http://manuals.voa.gov.uk/corporate/publications/Manuals/CustomerServicesManual/g-cs-man-part-7.html>

1. Introduction

- a) Occasionally a customer's behavior may fall short of normal standards. Try not to take this personally. Keep in mind that 99 times out of 100 you are not the object of their anger. There may be other reasons, nothing to do with the Canton City Public Health (CCPH), which are putting the customer under stress. And what we may believe is a minor problem, may appear more serious to the customer involved.

2. Calming the Conversation

- a) Listen carefully to the customer without interrupting.
- b) Apologize for the customer being upset and assure them that you will try to rectify or resolve their concerns.
- c) Reiterate what you heard back to the customer to assure that you are hearing their concerns appropriately.

3. Cause of anger

- a) Identifying the background and the problem(s) will assist you in resolving the situation.
- b) Sometimes you know why the customer is angry because:
 - You have background information relating to the case.
 - You have reasonable intuition/experience in dealing with customers.
 - You have established the problem from what the customer has already said.

4. To progress the conversation

- a) Give a positive response to what they have told you. Reassure the customer you want to help, but explain firmly that you require certain information from them before you can help. You may have to be assertive, and request they let you finish what you are saying before they start talking over you.
- b) Sometimes it is easier to let the customer say their piece, let them express their complaint and get the emotion out of their system, before you start to ask and clarify the information you need to help you decide your next course of action. While they vent their frustration, you should listen and try to understand the source of the frustration. While listening, you send a powerful unspoken message that you care about the situation.
- c) During the conversation, if the customer is persistently rude and swears, you should say that you cannot help them if they persist using unacceptable language (“Sir, I am glad to help you, but your language is not acceptable. If you continue, perhaps it would be better if you came back later when we can discuss this calmly”). If they continue to talk to you in this manner, you will terminate the conversation. Give them the opportunity to cease this behavior. If they are rude, you should not be rude back, but be firm and explain you are trying to help them.

- d) Keep calm and do not rise to their aggression. Do not take the criticism personally and remain objective. Do not let personal feelings cloud your judgment. Do not be intimidated, and even if they are forceful, do not accept what is said without challenge. You are entitled to correct clearly wrong statements and allegations. You should always be honest and not defensive. Avoid blame, but focus on resolving the problem. If the customer believes we have made a mistake, we have to accept what they say until we have carried out an investigation. After this we can tell the customer our findings and if we have made a mistake, we must put things right and apologize.
- e) If you cannot help the customer there and then, for example you need further information, you should politely explain to them why you cannot help at this stage, or why you need to speak to someone else, and let them know when you will contact them again. Ensure that you do this. Only make realistic promises and ensure that you do follow it up. Try to end on a positive and constructive note.
- f) If you cannot diffuse the situation, the employee should have the customer talk to the employees' immediate supervisor or the division leader or ask the customer to call back or come back at a later time.
- g) If another member of staff will need to see this person again, for example during an inspection, then they should be warned about the customer's potential to be difficult.
- h) If the customer makes a personal threat to you, inform your immediate supervisor immediately who will decide if further action is needed, for example to alert the police or to arrange for you to be escorted home.
- i) If the customer makes a more general threat, for example, he will plant a bomb on the premises; make sure you report it to your immediate supervisor immediately. It may be helpful to note any information about a threatening call, such as: where they are calling from, is there background noise for example, is the customer calm or drunk, hysterical or hyperventilating. This is useful information to pass to the police if necessary.

5. Additional Tips for Conversations at the counter

- a) The rules of politeness and firmness apply.
- b) If the customer persists on being intimidating, even after you have tried the above techniques, you can ask a Supervisor to come to the counter.
- c) If you fear for your safety, leave the counter if you can and fetch assistance immediately.

6. Field inspections where there are difficult customers

- a) If there is a file note to say the customer has in the past been threatening, extra care should be taken when arranging the field inspection. Consider:
 - If a threat has been made against a specific person, it may be wise to send a different person to avoid antagonism.
 - Ensure that whoever carries out the inspection is accompanied by another employee. If the customer has been especially threatening, consider having a police escort for the inspection.

- The other members of staff in the office should be informed of the address where the meeting/inspection is to take place and the time of the appointment. Then contact your colleagues once the meeting/inspection has been completed.
- The employee(s) who are going should take a mobile phone with them and leave the number in case they don't return after the agreed time limit, or cannot be contacted by the mobile phone.
- If the employee(s) do not return by the specified time, or there are causes for concern, the immediate supervisor or Division Leader should contact the police or send another employee to the address.

7. Abusive letters

- a) Some customers express their anger and personality in written form. Even if a letter is abusive or angrily worded, it is still important to see whether there is any substance to the complaint. All customers have a right to complain and receive a reply. When you do reply try, if possible, to concentrate on the substantive points and concerns and ignore the abuse. If an employee receives an abusive or other letter that makes them feel uncomfortable, the employee should notify their supervisor.

8. Canton City Public Health policy on unacceptable behavior by a customer:

- a) CCPH has a duty to ensure the safety and welfare of our staff.
- b) We are committed to dealing with all customers fairly and impartially and to providing a high standard of service. As part of this service we do not normally limit the contact customers have with us. However, we do not expect our staff to tolerate behavior by customers which is clearly unacceptable (e.g. abusive, offensive or threatening) and may take action to protect our staff from that behavior.
- c) When we consider that a customer's behavior is unacceptable we will tell them why that is so and will ask them to change it. If the unacceptable behavior continues, we will take action to restrict the customer's contact with us.
- d) The decision to restrict access to CCPH will be taken by the Health Commissioner or division leader after consultation with the Health Commissioner. Any restrictions imposed will be appropriate and proportionate.
- e) In all cases, we will write to tell the customer why we believe their behavior is unacceptable, what action we are taking and the duration of that action.
- f) Where a customer continues to behave in a way which is unacceptable, we may decide to terminate contact with that customer.
- g) Where the behavior is so extreme that it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of the CCPH staff, we will contact the police.