

# Is the Customer Always Right?

By Dr. Dennis Rosen

“The Customer is Always Right!” Everyone’s heard the phrase. Many businesses live by it and insist that their employees follow it. Is it true? *Is the customer always right?* No, and everyone knows it. What the phrase is really saying is that it is best to assume complaining customers are always right and give them what they want rather than lose good customers.

But is this really a good strategy to follow? I don’t think so, and others agree with me according to some of the things I read. These writers point out that there is a minority of bad customers out there who take advantage of businesses that apply this philosophy and cost these businesses real money. They argue that such customers should be “fired.” I agree. Not all customers are worth keeping.

## **The Question You *Should* Be Asking Instead**

Good. So now, what do you tell your employees? Help some customers; don’t help others? Do you say, “Some customers are good; some are bad – use your judgement”? It seems to me, too many who write on the topic haven’t really dealt with the practical situation of facing customer complaints. The bottom line is this, asking whether the customer is always right *is a waste of time*. The real question every owner, manager and employee should ask is: *Does the customer honestly believe he/she is right?* If you keep this phrase in your head and preach it to your employees, actions become clear.

## **The Honest Customer**

When customers honestly believe they are right, you should treat them as if they *are* right. You honor their requests and handle their problems. Customers may be making honest mistakes due to misunderstandings or confusion. Correcting them and rejecting their requests will simply create hard feelings and may lose them as customers. Employees must be trained to understand that saving a few dollars is not worth the loss of a good customer and that customer’s potential contribution to the bottom line of the business for years to come. If more than a few dollars are involved, a manager can be called in to aid in the situation.

If there is a need to correct the customer so misunderstandings do not develop in the future, do it *after* you have handled the complaint. If you do it before, you will be viewed as lecturing by the customer. If you do it after, you will be viewed as having gone the extra mile to make that customer happy.

## **The Less-Than-Honest Customer**

If you think the customer is *not* honest in his/her request or complaint, you should, in my view, politely refuse with justification. You may make some customers upset and they may not come back, but so what? Why would you want to keep them if they are trying to rip you off? My daughter was a part-time employee for several years for a major department store. Occasionally customers would come in with clothes to return that had clearly been worn and washed or were stained, etc. Most of us believe in fairness and honesty, so taking the clothing back was demoralizing to the employees and made them angry. And they knew, of course, that doing so just raised costs for the business and, thus, prices for good customers. I believe that politely refusing these customers with appropriate explanation (e.g., “I’m sorry, but there’s a stain here. I won’t be able to sell it, so I can’t take it back”) is called for in such situations. If you lose them, they simply become a problem for your competition.

## **The Judgement Call**

So, what if you don't know whether or not customers are being honest in their complaints or demands? Then you treat them as if they are correct, handle these situations to their satisfaction but get necessary information so they can be tracked over time to determine whether such problems continue with them in the future. If problems continue, you may change your evaluation and actions toward particular customers.

Yes, you can, and should at times, "fire" customers. But pick your battles carefully. When customers honestly believe they are right, make those customers happy. You'll hopefully WinFluence® them and turn them into devoted customers. If they clearly are not being honest in their complaints, refuse them and let them go. They aren't the ones who will build your business anyway.

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