

Connecting Through Conflict: Five Ways Great Connectors Turn Angry Clients into Happy Ones...and How You Can Too!

It's easy to connect with clients when things are going well. But when conflict arises, well, that's when "connectors" truly earn their stripes. Here's how to transform customer frustration into a stronger business relationship—one that lasts a long, long time.

By Maribeth Kuzmeski

It happens to the best of us. An upset client calls to complain about a product or service, and you're completely caught off guard. How do you react? Do you fly off the handle right along with him? Or do you respond in a calm, thoughtful way that salvages and even strengthens your relationship? A high-pressure scenario doesn't have to blow your client relationship sky-high—in fact, you can use it as an opportunity to truly connect with your client and keep him around for the long haul.

Conflict is a normal part of business, and we all need to learn how to deal with it in the right way. Some clients are just plain difficult. And yes, "easy" clients can also become dissatisfied for a variety of reasons. The good news is that there are effective ways to handle conflict and resolve issues—and these methods will actually strengthen your relationship.

Remember that quite often, unhappy clients will not even tell you that they have a problem. They simply move their business elsewhere. So, if a client thinks enough of you to give you the chance to repair a bad situation, take it. Play an active role in making your customer happy so that you can be sure to keep him or her on board with you.

Creating clients for life is all about building relationships based on real human connections, and that's the message found in my new book, *The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, September 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95). It describes how some of the world's most successful professionals develop better, more profitable connections. And a big part of the way they do it is changing the way they think about conflict.

As much as we all hope for smooth sailing in our interactions with clients, conflicts are bound to occur. If they never happened, anyone could be a great connector. It's what you do when there's a problem that separates the (proverbial) men from the boys. Here are a few tips that will help you keep your business relationships from going bad...and rescue those that have started to sour.

Extend a peace offering. It's easy to reach out to clients when things are going well. However, it's all too easy to avoid them when hard feelings are present. Don't succumb to the temptation. Proactively reaching out to your clients can squash any negativity they may feel for you. Even the simplest of gestures can be effective: Offer an apology when you've made a mistake. Then, make things right by extending a peace offering. It doesn't need to be anything extravagant. It can be as simple as a hand-written note, a refund, or a coupon.

I know the peace offering works on clients, because it has worked on me. At one point the relationship my firm and I had with a technology consulting group had turned sour. They had missed numerous project deadlines and just weren't satisfying my expectations. I stuck with them, though, in hopes of repairing the relationship. Then one day, my contact Jeremy and I discovered we had something in common—a love for hockey! In fact, one day I mentioned that my son's favorite team was the Pittsburgh Penguins, and that he and I would be watching them play in the Stanley Cup later that evening.

Well, the Penguins ended up winning, and much to my surprise, Jeremy sent my son copies of magazines featuring their big win, a copy of the actual Pittsburgh newspaper from the day they won, and a few other items. None of what he sent cost very much, but the impact of his gesture was significant. My son was beyond thrilled. He couldn't believe that one of my contacts had sent something for him! As for me, it immediately changed the way I felt about the company. My feeling was, "Really, they can't be all that bad. I mean, they are hockey fans, and they were nice to my son." Jeremy may not have known it, but he extended a peace offering that helped preserve my company's relationship with his.

Don't follow your "strike back" instincts. If an angry client calls you fuming mad, your knee-jerk reaction might be to argue. Remember, though, fighting anger with anger seldom works. No matter how tough it is, do the opposite of what you feel like doing. Take a deep breath and remain calm. And most of all, diffuse your client's anger by immediately assuring her that you will make it right.

When faced with difficult situations with clients, instead of giving a reactionary, defensive response, offer solutions. Your first reaction may be to explain why you are right, why the client is overreacting, or to give her additional information so she can better see the situation from your point of view. However, if you check those reactions and instead start working toward a resolution, your chances of keeping that customer are much greater.

When confronted with an angry client, say something like, “I know we did not satisfy your needs, and I assure you that we will do better in the future. Can I offer you a free gift the next time you stop in, or a discount off your next service?” Your client may still want to fight, but you are dispelling her anger by staying calm and offering a helpful response. Just smile, take responsibility (even if you feel you haven’t done anything wrong), and offer solutions. You can’t control the way your client is going to act, but you can control your own actions. If you are reasonable, your client will eventually come around.

The solutions you offer may not be exactly what the client wants, but you are trying to smooth things over instead of arguing; therefore, the results will no doubt be better. The legendary retailing genius Marshall Field once overheard a clerk in his store having a discussion with a customer. “What are you doing?” he asked. “I’m settling a complaint,” the clerk answered. “No, you’re not,” said Field. “Give the lady what she wants.” We can all learn a thing or two from that.

Get them to listen to you by...listening to them. Customers will listen to what you have to say if you respectfully listen to what they have to say first. Knowing that you are truly listening to their concerns can cause your customers to agree to your suggestions much more quickly.

Very few people in this world take the time to practice “Curious Listening.” We instead partially listen, get ready to respond, and let our minds drift. But if you can practice Curious Listening, which is a form of active listening, you will differentiate yourself as someone who really cares.

Here are the four steps of Curious Listening:

1. Hear the essence of what your customer is saying by repeating back what you heard.
2. Ask questions so that your customer knows that you are actively seeking to understand why something is important him.
3. Make sure you aren’t acting on unsubstantiated assumptions. Confirm with the client that you have correctly understood what he is saying.
4. Listen for the “remarkable.” In every conversation you have with a client, he will say something unique and remarkable. If you listen for his “remarkable,” you will be able to come back to that later (even in a subsequent conversation) and connect with him on a different level. The “remarkable” may be something as simple as, “I’m thinking about taking an October vacation to Paris,” or, “I’m a Packers fan,” or, “We just landed our largest client!” The key is remembering it. It

shows you are really curious about what happened, how the other person feels, and what resolution was reached.

Have a standard service protocol at the ready. Creating standards, procedures, and methods of dealing with clients and servicing their needs can really help when it comes to resolving conflicts or handling a dissatisfied customer. By creating a service protocol in advance, you provide a way to “enforce” how client conflict situations are handled. This allows you and your employees to more easily resolve issues and deal with those impossibly and consistently difficult clients.

When developing a service protocol, start by recalling past situations. Consider how and when a difficult client became difficult. Was a resolution reached? If so, when and how? By examining how difficult clients were handled in the past, taking into account both good and bad examples, you and your staff can begin to set boundaries regarding what is and isn't a proper way to react. Creating a protocol allows you to chart your path to resolution and figure out what you're going to say before a problem arises.

Your service protocol empowers your employees to become connectors. Often, they might think offering a discount or a coupon is the right way to handle a situation, but they may be worried that you, their leader, won't approve. With the protocol, they know exactly what they can immediately offer to the client. You'll find that effectively resolving problems with clients actually makes them more loyal to you because they see that you care about their business.

Ask for feedback. Obviously, you don't have to sit around, anxiously wondering when a problem is going to arise. There is a way for you to avoid some (unfortunately, not all!) client conflicts. You can do it by ensuring that customers aren't suppressing problems. And you do *that* by constantly asking for feedback. (It's amazing how rarely businesspeople do this—they're usually just keeping their fingers crossed that all is well—but a sincere inquiry about a client's satisfaction is a true pathway to making a connection.)

Don't be afraid to engage your clients. Ask them what you can do better, how you can improve. Supply them with feedback surveys so that they can anonymously share their thoughts, ensuring that they are as honest as possible. And when a problem has been solved, ask them if you handled it to their satisfaction and find out if there is anything they would like for you to have done differently. Asking for feedback is a great way for you to rectify any possible or growing problems before they become so great that they sour a client relationship.

Clients who feel a connection with you are loyal and will stay with you—sometimes forever. Dissatisfied clients not only go elsewhere, but they also tell others of their dissatisfaction. What's even worse is that those dissatisfied clients will each tell an average of five other people about their displeasure with you. That means for

every complaint, you could have up to 60 people who are walking around with a negative image of you and your company—and are talking about it!

By actively and sincerely playing a part in resolving conflicts with your clients, you're showing them that you are willing to do what it takes to make them happy. You are not just fixing a problem for them. You are also turning those dissatisfied clients into delighted ones who may even become evangelists for your company! And we all know there is no marketing force more powerful than a customer who shares her delight with others.

###

About the Author:

Maribeth Kuzmeski, MBA is author of *The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, September 2009). Creating strong business relationships has been the focus of Kuzmeski's business and career. Her book, *The Connectors*, is packed full of tools and techniques aimed at helping readers develop better, more profitable connections—tools and techniques proven effective by some of the world's most successful professionals.

Maribeth is the founder of Red Zone Marketing, LLC, which consults to Fortune 500 firms on strategic marketing planning and business growth. Maribeth has personally consulted with some of the world's most successful CEO's, entrepreneurs and professionals. An internationally recognized speaker, she shares the tactics that businesspeople use today to create more sustainable business relationships and sales and marketing successes.

She is the author of 4 books, has frequently appeared on TV and radio, and has written articles on marketing strategies for hundreds of publications including Business Week and Entrepreneur. She regularly speaks to audiences on topics relating to business development, marketing, and sales strategies.

Maribeth graduated with a degree in journalism from Syracuse University and has an MBA from The George Washington University. She lives in the Chicago, IL area with her husband Rich and 2 teenagers.

About the Book:

The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life (Wiley, September 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95) is available at bookstores nationwide, major online booksellers, or directly from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797.

For more information, please visit www.redzonemarketing.com and www.theconnectorsbook.com.