



# **Six Guidelines for Turning Complaints Into Customer Learning Experiences!**

— by Janelle Barlow, Ph.D.  
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"Personally I'm always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught." Winston Churchill

Customers, like British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, may be eager to learn what we have to teach them, but, as Churchill pointed out, education is a sensitive communication exchange and needs to be carefully handled so our customers don't feel talked down to.

Most parents learn quickly that if they do everything for their children, their youngsters will remain dependent on them. After a while, that's no fun for either. So, most parents will take the time and trouble to show their frustrated/complaining children how to do things for themselves. It gives children a greater sense of control over their lives, gives them the satisfaction of knowing how to take care of themselves, and perhaps most importantly, shows them they don't always need their parents around to get things done. The same is true for customers.

We can create dependency relationships with our customers if we don't show them how to care for their own needs. Suppose the only way for customers to get their needs met is to come back to you with their problems. In that case, it may put undue pressure on your complaint-handling system, diminishing your capacity to help others.

The following guidelines apply not just to paying customers but also to internal customers — your colleagues. Because of the frequency of interaction with internal customers, I recommend applying these ideas to your colleagues, your ongoing business customers or distributors, and finally, to all your other customers.



- **Listen carefully to ensure understanding.** Many times, people will say they understand something when they don't. This can set up false expectations. Customers may be put in the embarrassing situation of having to call you back and admit they couldn't follow the instructions you gave them. Or, to save face, they may claim that they were given incorrect instructions. However they choose to address their ignorance, customers feel placed in an uncomfortable emotional box as someone who doesn't understand what they were told. It's better to make sure they know rather than assume they do when they say, "Yes, I get it" Always, always, always check your assumptions.
- **Note danger spots.** If customers take care of their own needs, be sure both of you understand where they can get into trouble. This is particularly true with information-technology products. I've seen many customers who thought they followed instructions only to crash an entire computer system. After a session with a customer, you can summarize the danger points. "Let me give you a small word of caution. The order in which you do this is critical. Here's the best way to proceed. If you do it in any other order, you risk crashing the entire network's mainframe! Would you like me to send you an e-mail about that?" Be clear about potential danger.
- **Set up checkpoints.** If there is a chance that your customers will create problems for themselves, point out to them checkpoints along the way. Let them know you would rather help them with a minor issue instead of waiting for a major problem. This could be as simple as, "If you haven't received a response by the 15th of the month, be sure to check back."
- **Share information about the knowledge levels of different customers.** As most organizations have several service personnel dealing with the same client, each interaction shouldn't have to involve starting over again from the beginning. If your system allows for notes to be entered, indicate levels of competence in your data bank. Be sure to show these levels in favorable terms. State what customers know rather than what they don't know.

- **Give them hints about how to speed up service.** For example, if having certain information available speeds up service, then pass that information along. Make sure it is presented as a service to the customer. "By the way, the next time you call, we can help you even faster if..." Then tell them how to make that happen.
- **Finally, be sure to reward your customers** when they do handle something for themselves. Thank them and praise them. You are becoming partners in the truest sense of the word, and it's essential to appreciate customers for forming such a relationship with you. After all, you both benefit from this complaint/problem-handling approach.

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