
3. Dealing with difficult customers

Overview

Purpose

Generally, when arriving at a service call, a gas technician/fitter can expect the customer to be irritable and concerned, rather than warm and friendly. For this reason, gas technicians/fitters work in potentially hostile environments. In order to deal with customer-related problems in an effective manner, the technician/fitter must be able to recognize and handle difficult situations. This Chapter covers the basic skills that are vital for identifying and dealing with difficult customers and situations.

Objectives

At the end of this Chapter, you will be able to:

- describe how to deal with customer complaints;
- describe techniques for dealing with difficult customers;
- identify types of difficult customers; and
- identify high-risk situations.

Terminology

Term	Abbreviation (symbol)	Definition
Non-verbal communication		Sending and receiving messages through facial expression, tone of voice, and body language
Verbal communication		Sending and receiving messages through words

Dealing with customer complaints

Calming upset customers

A spirit of cooperation can help solve every problem. Using the cooperative approach, you and the customer should usually be able to come up with a win-win solution to the problem.

An upset customer is different from a difficult customer. An upset customer may have moments of unreasonable behaviour, but still be basically rational. On the other hand, difficult people are chronically hard to communicate with as a result of a psychological need to get attention through disruptive and negative means. Some customers will insist on being unreasonable no matter

what you do for them. You must have patience. On these occasions, you would be well-advised to call in your supervisor.

Let's consider some of the reasons customer interactions go wrong and may become more "difficult".

Reason	Why they may become more "difficult"
You seem not to care.	You don't sound or look as if you care, are concerned, or appreciate the customer's situation. Although you may care, you really need to say caring words and look and sound as if you care. After all, the customer can't read your mind.
You don't listen.	Too often we try to jump in with solutions and don't allow the customer to vent their feelings. Again, you need to show the customer that you're listening by your body language as well as what you say and how you say it.
You let the customer "get to you".	Sometimes we allow the customer's attitude to irritate or annoy us. When this becomes obvious to the customer, again through our tone of voice or body language, it only fuels bad feelings.
You use the wrong words.	There are certain trigger words that cause a customer to become more difficult. Some of these are "can't, have to, sorry about that". Even industry jargon can have a negative effect on a customer interaction.
You don't see it from the customer's point of view.	Too often service personnel think the customer is making too much of a fuss.

Customers will often judge the level of your service based on how well you recover from a difficult situation. They are very likely to forgive you if you end the interaction on a positive note.

What upset customers want

An upset customer wants four basic things:

Customers expect...	To meet the expectation...
Someone to listen to them	Use effective listening techniques to assure the customer of your attentiveness to the problem.
Someone to treat them with respect	Do not be arrogant or condescending in your words or actions.
Someone to take their problem seriously	Respond to the customer in a confident, serious, professional manner.
Someone to solve their problem immediately	Act as quickly as circumstances permit to solve the customer's problem.

Focus on the problem

- Determine whether the customer is more interested in having someone listen to them or in immediate action, and respond appropriately. In all discussions with difficult customers, focus on the problem and its solution and not on the persons involved.
- Do not encourage or agree with a customer who criticizes your company or its management.
- Identify the cause of the customer's distress and recap it to show your understanding.



Resolve the problem

- Propose a solution to the problem and discuss it with the customer.
- Confirm that the proposed solution is acceptable to the customer.
- Have the customer sign an authorization form before commencing work.
- Perform a follow-up after the work is complete to ensure the customer is still satisfied.

Steps to resolving a problem

You can use the following step-by-step techniques to help calm an upset customer and resolve their problem at the same time:

- 1) Listen to the customer.
- 2) Show empathy with the customer.
- 3) Clarify the problem.
- 4) Develop a cooperative approach to the problem.

Step 1—Listen to the customer

Practice and use these listening techniques to assist you in dealing effectively with all customers, not just the difficult ones:

Do...	Do not/never...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen for the feelings as well as the facts the speaker is trying to express. • Take brief notes of important details, but still maintain regular eye contact if speaking in person. • Eliminate distractions that may interfere with your conversation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticize the speaker and his or her manner of speaking. • Fake attention—let your actions show the speaker that you are attentive to them.



A good listener does not...	But will...
Assume anything	Get the facts
Take a know-it-all attitude	Listen respectfully
Talk too much	Let the customer speak
Give out too much information	Keep his or her responses short and simple
Does not take what the speaker is saying personally	Maintain a professional attitude at all times

Step 2—Show empathy with the customer

You can diffuse much of a customer's anger and avoid escalating his/her anger by using words and phrases designed to show empathy with the customer.

You can show empathy by acknowledging customers' feelings. You can let them know that you understand why they are upset by using the proper words to respond to them.

Unacceptable response	Good way to respond
"You are crazy."	"I appreciate what you are saying."
"I know how you feel."	"I can understand why you feel that way" or "I can understand how that would be annoying for you."
"Boy, are you mad."	"I can see how you would be upset."
"I don't know why you are so upset."	"If it were me, I would be upset too" or "I am sorry for the inconvenience we have caused."

Step 3—Clarify the problem

Before you can solve a customer's problem, you must fully understand what it is. Paraphrase or recap what he or she tells you to give assurance that you know what the customer is trying to say.

Unacceptable response	Good way to respond
"You're way off base."	"What it sounds like you are saying is..."
"You are not making any sense."	"Maybe I am not understanding you correctly."
"That is definitely wrong."	"Let me see if I have this straight."
"Did you really say...."	"This is what I understood you to say."

Step 4—Develop a cooperative approach to the problem

When you can get the customer to cooperate with you, it is much easier to identify and solve a problem. Using effective language will help develop a spirit of cooperation between you and the customer.

Unacceptable response	Good way to respond
"We can't do that."	"I would like to help you find a solution to the problem."
"You certainly have a problem."	"Let's see what we can do together to work out a solution to this problem."

Preventable situations

You are unable to control the behaviour of an upset or difficult customer, but you can ensure that your own behaviour does not cause them further annoyance.

Sometimes, you or someone else in your company may be responsible for causing a customer to be upset. Table 3-1 lists several preventable situations that can cause customers to become upset and the corresponding actions you can take to remedy the situations.

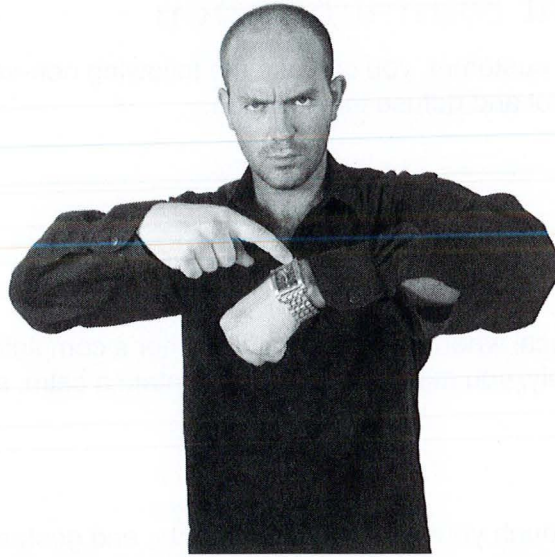
Table 3-1
Preventable situations and remedial actions

Preventable situations	Remedial action by gas technician/fitter
Someone promised the customer something that was not delivered.	Follow through on what was promised.
Someone was rude or indifferent to the customer.	In some instances, the discourtesy is unintentional. The customer may sometimes interpret what is intended as humour as rudeness. Always treat the customer with respect.
The customer feels that someone in your company presented an unpleasant attitude towards him or her.	A customer may sometimes be rude or surly, but you must not use this behaviour as an excuse to act in an unprofessional manner.
The customer feels he or she was not listened to.	Customers want to be listened to and do not want to repeat themselves unnecessarily. Be attentive to the customer and use good listening techniques.
Someone told the customer that he or she has no right to be angry.	Emotions are not right or wrong. Telling customers they have no right to be angry will probably make them angrier. Be patient and sympathetic.
The customer received a smart or flip reply in answer to a question.	Responding to a customer with sarcasm will increase their anger or upset and increase tension. Reply to questions professionally and with respect for the customer.
Someone in your company has argued with the customer.	Remember that avoiding an argument is the only way to get the best of it. When you argue with a customer, you always lose—even though you may win the argument.

Techniques for dealing with difficult situations

As a gas technician/fitter making a service call, you have a specific objective: to provide technical service. You are not making a social call.

After a customer makes a service call, there is always some delay before a technician/fitter arrives. Pressures can build up as the customer waits. If the technician/fitter comes later than expected, the customer may become angry or upset. The customer does not care about traffic, the weather, or other uncontrollable reasons has caused the delay. The customer is only concerned about getting a solution for his/her problem as quickly as possible.



Generally, the gas technician/fitter can expect the customer to be irritable and concerned, rather than warm and friendly. For this reason, the gas technician/fitter works in a potentially hostile environment.

In order to deal with customer-related problems in an effective manner, the gas technician/fitter must be able to recognize and handle difficult situations. This requires three basic skills. The gas technician/fitter must:

- understand the basic psychology of stress;
- be caring and diplomatic; and
- be able to put himself or herself in the customer's place in order to understand the customer's difficulties.

Using personal presence

If you find yourself in a position where you are dealing with a difficult customer, the way you present yourself is one of your most effective tools.

You can use your professional image to project power, control, knowledge, and composure. If, however, you are dressed inappropriately or too casually, or are unkempt and unprofessional in appearance, the customer is more likely to aggressively respond to you.

Example

At some time, you may have experienced the effect of your appearance on someone when you were the customer. For example, you may have noticed how much easier it is to get service in some establishments when you are neatly dressed and well-groomed than it is when you are sloppily dressed and untidy in appearance.

Using non-verbal communication

When dealing with an angry customer, you can use the following non-verbal communication techniques to help you control and defuse the situation:

- facial expression;
- body language; and
- tone of voice.

Facial expression

Your facial expression is critical when listening to a customer's complaint. If you roll your eyes, scowl, or smile inappropriately, you may incite anger. Maintain a calm, sincere, concerned, interested expression.

Body language

Show your attentiveness through your posture, movements, and gestures. Do not slouch—stand up straight. Do not cross your arms. Maintaining an open, non-threatening posture shows that you are listening with an open mind. Keep a respectful distance from customers—crowding them may increase their anger. Avoid touching a person who is upset. If a person is potentially violent, this contact may trigger a violent outburst.

Tone of voice

Speak in a calm, confident, caring, soothing voice. This will assist you in calming the customer. People respond more to how you speak rather than to what you are saying. Avoid sounding impatient, annoyed, or condescending when you are speaking to the customer.

Using verbal communication

When dealing with an angry customer, using the proper verbal communication techniques will also help you control and diffuse the situation.

Verbal expressions

Do not sigh or use similar expressions of annoyance or impatience in front of an angry customer.

Never curse

Never curse even if a customer does. As a professional, you must maintain your composure and avoid responding to verbal abuse. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, to remain calm and respond to verbal abuse with patience.

Polite repetition

If a customer persists in demanding something unreasonable or impossible, tell them what you can do. Do not say what you cannot do. Continue to repeat your offer calmly and patiently until the customer understands.

How to get the customer's attention

If a customer will not give you a chance to explain or ask questions, you might try using their name at the beginning of your sentence. This is often an effective way to get a person's attention, as most people listen when they hear their name.

When dealing with emotional customers

- Lower the pitch of your voice.
- Talk more slowly than you normally would, without being offensive.
- Maintain eye contact with the customer.
- Maintain an interested, concerned, non-threatening facial expression.
- Tell customers what you can do for them—not what you cannot do.
- Refuse to be drawn into an argument with the customer.
- Remain silent. This strategy has its advantages:
 - By saying nothing, you will not be responding to a customer's negative comments.
 - It will give you time to think and help you maintain your composure.

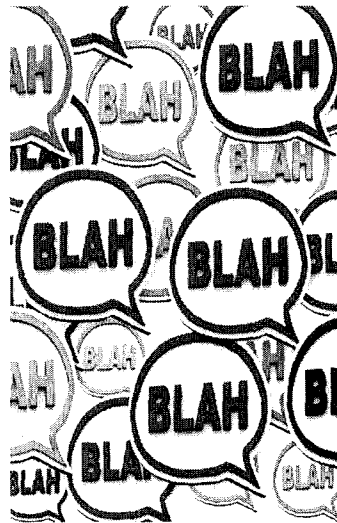
Types of difficult customers

When dealing with difficult customers, the first step is to determine the type you are dealing with. A difficult customer generally falls into one of the following categories:

- the talkative customer;
- the unresponsive customer;
- the obstinate customer;
- the whining customer;
- the rude customer;
- the customer suppressing anger;
- the hostile customer; and
- the drunk or profane customer.

The talkative customer

In a situation where the customer insists on talking about his or her problems to the extent that it interferes with your ability to get on with your work, there are a couple of strategies that you can use:



Option 1

Agree that you have a problem to solve, that you can begin to solve it right now, and could they please show you the way to the furnace, thermostat, etc. This ends the conversation with a practical question, but in a way that respects the dignity of the customer.

Option 2

Another method is to turn the topic of conversation toward the specific trouble that the customer asked you to correct and make a statement or ask a question that calls for the customer's action. This method also should help you get on with the job without showing disrespect for the customer.

Example

This example is one method of dealing with a talkative customer. If the customer, Mr. Jones, insists on discussing his problems or other topics and is preventing you from beginning work on the actual problem, you might say:

"Mr. Jones, I understand that you have a problem with your furnace. You said that the house is not warming up to the temperature you set on the thermostat. I can solve that problem for you right now. Can you show me where the thermostat is located?"

This method ends the conversation with Mr. Jones by asking a practical question that gives him input to the problem and respects his dignity, while allowing you to get on with the job.

The unresponsive customer

Some people are naturally shy and passive. When a customer is unresponsive and has little to say, ask questions that require answers with full sentences and that will give you the information you need. For example, you can begin with one of the following questions:

“What is the problem you are experiencing?”

“How did it happen?”

“What can I do to help?”

The obstinate customer

If a customer insists on being obstinate and uncooperative, and you are having trouble coming to an agreement, make comments directed towards finding a solution to the problem. The following phrases are a good way to begin this process:

“What would you like me to do now (customer’s name)?”

“What do you think would be a good way to solve this problem?”

“What can I do to make you happy?”

In response, the customer may often be less demanding than you expect. However, if you cannot reach an agreement, you should call in your supervisor.

The whining customer

Occasionally, you may encounter a customer who is a “whiner”. A whiner likes to tell others all about their feelings, hurts, and disappointments. They may complain about how late you were getting to the call or how someone else in your company was rude to them. Your goal is to get them to focus on active communication. To do this, you can ask questions like:

“How could we have served you better?”

“How would you like things to be handled the next time?”

The rude customer

The main thing to do when dealing with a rude customer is to keep your cool. Smile in a friendly, inoffensive way and ask questions, such as:

“What would you like me to do to solve the problem you are having?”

“I am not meeting your expectations. What can I do?”

The customer suppressing anger

It is difficult to communicate with people who keep their anger “bottled up”. Their words may not indicate their mood, but the tone of their voice certainly will. Before you can establish meaningful communication with them, you must allow them to express their anger. You can accomplish this in the following ways:

- Express to the customer what you see by stating:

"You are obviously very concerned about what has happened."

"You have every right to be upset about it."

- Try to get the customer to talk about what is bothering them. Ask questions like:

"How do you feel about it?"

"What was your reaction when it happened?"

- After the customer has had a chance to express their anger, you can move on to questions that will allow you to get on with solving their problem.



The hostile customer

You cannot communicate with a customer who is shouting—you must wait until he or she has calmed down. In the meantime, there are several things you can do to help the situation:

- Listen actively and attentively—let customers continue until their anger has subsided.
- Maintain eye contact and a concerned facial expression.
- Use positive body language—maintain an open, friendly posture.
- When you can speak, use phrases that show you empathize with the customer such as those beginning with "Yes, I see".
- When circumstances allow, recap the feelings they have expressed and the reason for their anger.
- Identify the problem that needs solution and try to maintain a focus on that.
- When possible, move on to asking the customer questions that will allow you to get on with the job. For example:

"What can I do to help solve this problem?"



The drunk or profane customer

As a service technician, you should never allow a customer to verbally abuse you nor should you be exposed to potential violence. However, sometimes you may unexpectedly find yourself in an abusive environment. When this occurs, there are techniques you can use to deal with the situation.

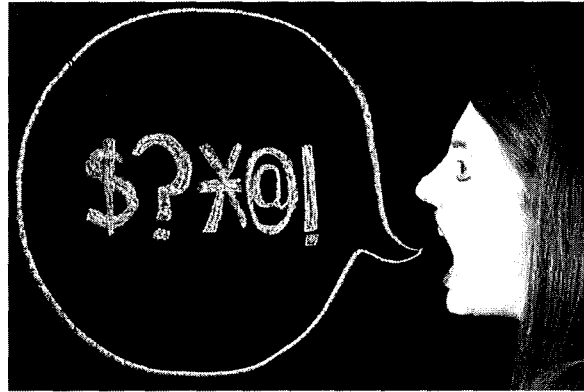
You must never actually accuse a customer of being drunk or of being under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Such a statement can make you and your employer liable to legal action.

When a customer is abusive, you can say either of the following:

"I am sorry, but if you cannot speak to me on a professional basis, I will have to call my supervisor."

"I am sorry, but if you cannot speak to me on a professional basis, I will have to leave."

Immediately following the incident, make accurate notes for future reference. If a fellow worker is present and has witnessed the incident, have this co-worker read and sign your notes.



High-risk situations

Avoiding situations that put you at risk

As a gas service technician, you may at times find yourself in situations that may put you at risk. You should never put yourself in situations that could endanger you, invite undue criticism, or create serious misunderstandings.

The work of a gas technician/fitter affects a person's basic survival. Answering a no-heat call on a cold evening puts you face-to-face with customers who are depending on your actions and assistance to provide for their family's safety and survival. Understanding their level of anxiety up front may help defuse tension.

The following are circumstances that may put you at risk:

- Putting yourself in a situation where you could receive criticisms for your actions and that could adversely affect your own and the gas company's reputation.
- Entering a home where young children or minors are alone on the premises at any time without adult supervision.
- When a customer or another adult representative is not always on the premises.
- When a customer is obviously under the influence of alcohol or other substances.
- When a customer is abusive or unreasonable.

Dealing with potential violence

There may be occasions when an enraged customer confronts and threatens you or becomes violent. In a situation of this kind, rely on your gut feelings if it appears that the situation could get out of control.

Recognizing potentially dangerous customers

You can learn to detect potentially violent behaviour by reading the body language and other non-verbal communication of the customer. Look for signs such as:

- clenched fists and tense body posture;
- red face, tight lips, flared nostrils, and wide-open eyes;

- an agitated and aggressive tone of voice; and
- evidence of alcohol or drug use.

If a customer does become unruly or threatens you with violence, seek assistance from someone—you do not have to put up with threats of any sort.

Never attempt to reason with a customer who is threatening or who may be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. If a customer appears potentially violent, do not be too embarrassed to call the police. It is better to risk embarrassment than to be a victim of violence.

Personal safety tips

Read the danger signs and signals in your work environment.

Do...	Do not/never...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask your dispatcher to check company records if you suspect that a customer has a previous history of being a problem or of aggressive or violent behaviour. • If you feel threatened, get away to a safe location—if necessary, you can return later with your supervisor or the police. • Immediately report all incidents of aggression or violence to your supervisor and to company security—report all details in writing. • Be more cautious at night—criminal activity and personal crime increases sharply during the night hours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the emergency or work situation distract you from paying attention to what is going on around you—perform an occasional check to ensure you are not being stalked or followed. • Make yourself a target for robbery—do not openly flash money or wear expensive jewelry.

Assignment Questions – Chapter 3

- Match customer expectations with the description of how to meet their expectations.

a) Use effective listening techniques to assure the customer of your attentiveness to the problem:	To be listened to
b) Do not be arrogant or condescending in your words or actions:	To have their problem taken seriously
c) Respond to the customer in a confident, serious, professional manner:	To be treated with respect
d) Act as quickly as circumstances permit to solve the customer's problem:	To have their problem solved immediately

- 2) What should be done after a customer's problem has been solved and the work is complete?
 - a) Nothing
 - b) Produce an invoice for the work and demand payment
 - c) Perform a follow-up to ensure the customer is still satisfied
- 3) Which of the following is a better choice of words than, "I know how you feel," when responding to a customer's complaint?
 - a) "You are overreacting"
 - b) "I can understand why you feel that way"
 - c) "It's not that bad"
- 4) Which is the better choice of words than, "You are not making any sense" when responding to a customer's concerns?
 - a) "That is definitely wrong"
 - b) "Maybe I am not understanding you correctly"
 - c) "You're way off base"
 - d) "Did you really say..."
- 5) What is the best policy regarding arguments with a customer?
 - a) Listen, but make sure the customer agrees with you by the end
 - b) Advise the customer you are the expert
 - c) Avoiding arguments is the best policy
- 6) Which of the following non-verbal communication techniques can be used to diffuse a customer's anger?
 - a) Facial expression (calm, sincere, concerned, interested expression)
 - b) Turn your back to the customer
 - c) Say nothing and leave without fixing the problem
- 7) What is an appropriate response to a customer who is demanding something unreasonable or impossible?
 - a) Calmly leave the location and mark it on the work order
 - b) Calmly and patiently tell them what you are able to do, not what you cannot do
 - c) Calmly leave without saying anything
- 8) What is a poor response when dealing with a rude customer?
 - a) "Do you want this fixed or not?"
 - b) "What would you like me to do to solve the problem you are having?"
 - c) "I am not meeting your expectations. What can I do?"
- 9) What is a good response to an abusive customer?
 - a) "You are rude, and I do not have to take this abuse, I am leaving"
 - b) Say nothing, turn around and leave
 - c) "I am sorry, but if you cannot speak to me on a professional basis, I will have to leave"