



The difference between Sympathy and Empathy

Being great at customer service does not mean we should always be sympathetic to our client's issues. There is a significant difference between being sympathetic with a client and showing empathy.

Some people believe we should be sympathetic - to show understanding. Yet when we are sympathetic, we join them in the same emotional space so there is a danger of there becoming two victims instead of one. A great customer manager will see the clear difference between what happened and whom it happened to—and work on the former to bring things back to normal.

What's the Difference?

The Oxford English Dictionary states that sympathy is “feeling pity or sorrow for someone else's misfortune” and empathy is “understanding the feelings someone else is having.” Empathy means you can objectively ‘stand in someone else's shoes’ whereas sympathy means you can acknowledge another person's emotional state without necessarily understanding it.

So what has that got to do with customer service?

Understanding your customer's experience as they engage with you is vital so that all staff can give customers a consistent experience. After all, we are all customers so can empathise with where the problems are and what we would want the process to look like if we were experiencing the journey ourselves.

Getting it right goes a long way to making the customer experience better for our customers but it misses the ability to show your customer that you're listening and that you understand what they are experiencing. This is where empathy is so important (e.g. active listening and building rapport).

Responding to customers with sympathy—getting as upset as they are—puts you on an emotional roller coaster and can leave you worn out and frazzled at the end of the day. The trick is to be emotionally aware and sensitive without becoming too emotionally involved.

When you respond with empathy, you stay calm and in control of yourself. Only then you become at your absolute best: ready, willing, and able to help your customer meet his needs or solve her problem.

Showing empathy for customers allows you to be professional and caring at the same time. It also makes customers feel that they are important and what they are saying matters.

All too often customer service teams respond to customers with sympathy. A sympathetic response could be: “I’m also unhappy with the delayed delivery, it’s really frustrating.”

Sympathy is rarely an ideal response to a customer’s problem. Instead, show empathy. Empathy allows you to be professional and caring at the same time. It also allows you to avoid becoming emotionally involved (like when you show sympathy).

Think about it this way: when you’re sympathetic, you simply feel badly for someone. Sympathy doesn’t communicate to a customer that you understand WHY they feel the way they feel – it only allows you to communicate that you understand their problem. A typical response – “I’m sorry” – is insufficient to solve a customer’s problem. You must do more.

On the other hand, empathy communicates that you not only understand the customer’s problem, but also that you can relate it to something you yourself have experienced.

We can develop and show empathy by listening and building rapport with our clients.

5 tips for building rapport

1. Use client's names to help them feel valued and listened to
2. Smile (even if on the phone) – the customer will notice this in your voice
3. Show interest. No surprise to anyone, people are self-focused. People want to feel like they have an opening to share what they're thinking, including their desires, fears, and problems. The more genuinely interested you appear the more relaxed and willing to share they're likely to be.
4. Repeat back - Repeating important details and recapping back to the customer reassures them that you are paying attention
5. Pace and lead - This technique is extremely useful when someone is in an over-excited state. Start by showing urgency, confidence and concern in your speech patterns and manner to match and reassure them. Then gradually begin to calm and slow up your speech patterns. As long as the customer feels things are happening and that you're in rapport, they will follow you down and become calmer in response.

Showing empathy results in stronger customer relationships and makes for a more enjoyable working environment and is a great skill (in work and in life) to have.