How to Talk to Your Angriest Customers

By Gregory Ciotti

Harsh words are not always indicative of insight. Customer complaints are not always a sign that something is wrong.

Be that as it may, great feedback can be buried within the vitriol. You need to give credence to every message that customers send. Oftentimes, a negative experience can be salvaged and turned into an opportunity. Being able to assess and address customer complaints is key to making this happen.

Why customer complaints matter

Data suggests that nine out of ten times, a customer will continue doing business with you even after a slip-up—but only if you wholly fix the situation the first time.

Support isn't about always being right, it's about always being willing to make it right. Here are a few principles for doing just that.

11 Tips on How to Handle Customer Complaints

- Look past the fury for friction

- Record and organize meaningful complaints

- Identify who you are talking to

- Don't be passive-aggressive

- Transfer quickly, but explain why

- <u>Use supportive questioning</u>

- <u>Time is of the essence</u>

- <u>Verify the resolution</u>

- <u>Treat customers with genuine respect</u>

- <u>Don't drag out a lost cause</u>

- <u>CARP Diem to resolve complaints</u>

1. Look past the fury for friction

It's a fallacy to assume that just because someone is behaving wildly, his or her argument has no merit. Complaints, even angry ones, can contain insight — it's your job to seek out the friction.

Evernote CEO Phil Libin offers up one of my favorite truisms on listening to feedback: "Feedback is great for telling you what you did wrong. It's terrible at telling you what you should do next."

<u>Socratic questioning</u>, whether to the customer or to yourself, can help get to the source of the issue. Okay, the customer's angry — is this because we weren't clear with our copy? Is our user experience setting the customer up for failure? Did *we* drop the ball with our communication?

It is tempting to dismiss complainers as cranky or overly sensitive, but do that too often and you'll ending up dismissing genuine feedback.

2. Record and organize meaningful complaints

Free customers always ask for more free stuff. Feature requests often turn into product demands. While helping customers is always right, haphazardly

following their demands is <u>always wrong</u>.

Multiple messages from multiple customers with recurring concerns is the beginning of a narrative. The volume of a certain complaint only raises the red flag, though; you'll have to carefully decide what to do next.

You'll need a simple way to organize this sort of feedback, and <u>here's an overview of some options</u>.

The key is to make it easy, and make it browse-able. "Hard to do" leads to never being done. Give your team a meaningful way to make note of meaningful complaints, and you can rest easy, because you will hear about them.

3. Identify who you are talking to

<u>This study</u> on customer complaints presents a strong case for evaluating messages through a selection of common archetypes. Here are a few notable personas that will make their way into your inbox:

The Meek Customer. Generally averse to talking to you. He doesn't want to be a burden, or he doesn't think you'll care—either way, it's your responsibility to inquire deeper to get to the heart of exactly what is wrong.

The Aggressive Customer. Outspoken and not shy about letting you know what's on her mind. Avoid mirroring this confrontational behavior, and instead react with firm politeness that is pleasant but not submissive—your team needs to be treated with respect, too.

The High Roller. Perhaps your "enterprise" customer, who likely pays well and demands premium support for it. While no customer is fond of excuses, this customer disdains hearing them. Setting up a VIP Folder with <u>Workflows</u> is a

simple way to cater to the high roller's needs.
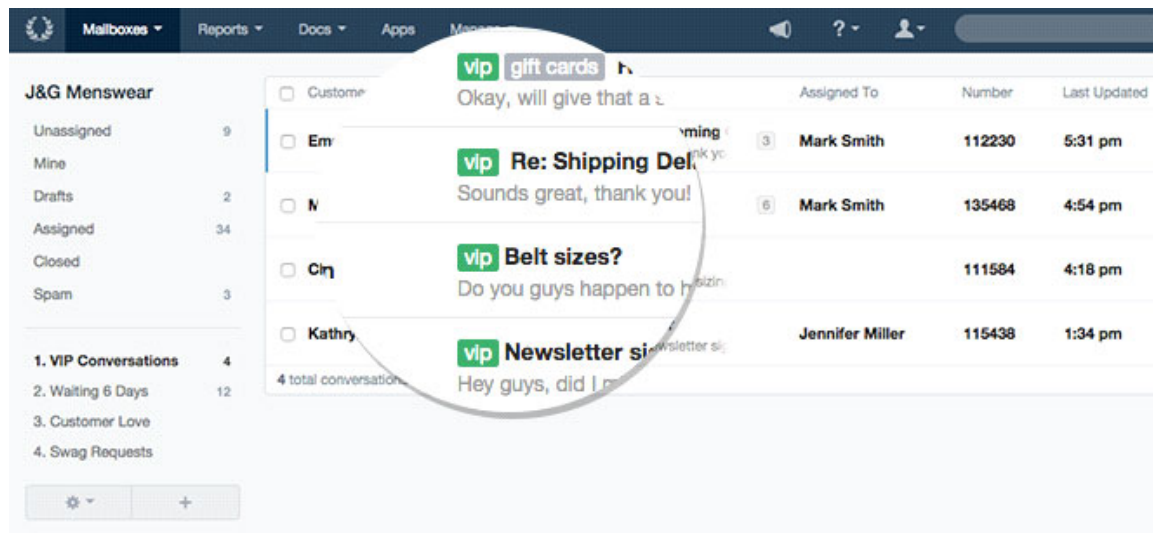
The Chronic Complainer. This customer will contact you a lot, but that doesn't mean that his issues should be dismissed. Patience is required here, but once satisfied, this customer will have no qualms about singing your praises to others.

The Barnacle. Although the research identifies this as the "rip-off" customer, I find the barnacle label to be more accurate. This person is never happy. She is *not* looking for a satisfactory response; she is trying to get something she doesn't deserve. Nothing is good enough unless she's getting a handout. Maintain composure and respond as objectively as possible.

These are generally the ends of the spectrum. Most people are reasonable, and most conversations are uneventful. Should you come across one of the above, however, put those tried-and-true support skills to work.

4. Don't be passive-aggressive

"We're sorry that you are having this problem" is an infuriating phrase for a customer to hear. It is nothing more than the deferment of blame.

Far too many use this sort of language by accident. The attempt to apologize comes off as dismissive, all thanks to a <u>misuse of tone</u>.

Just say you're sorry. Even when the customer is being unreasonable, apologize outright and ask how you might help resolve the issue. If you come across a lost cause, keep it friendly, keep it professional, and keep it moving.

5. Transfer quickly, but explain why

"Please hold while I transfer you. Your call is very important to us."

Terrible. While this problem isn't nearly as bad over email, introductions or handing someone off should be handled with care. Never miss an opportunity to briefly explain to a customer why this movement will be to their benefit. It's nearly impossible to get anyone excited about being transferred, but consider the two choices you have:

- I'll have to transfer you for that. *click*

- I'm going to set you up with our specialist who will get that squared away for you right away. *"That'll work!"*

Without this brief but relevant insertion, customers won't know that you are actually doing the best thing, and second only to doing the best thing is *letting people know you are*.

6. Use supportive questioning

There is a fine line between following up and inadvertently swaying a customer to dwell upon his bad mood.

Let's look at these two responses:

- "Is there anything else wrong?"

- "How else can I help you today?"

Asking a customer a leading, negative question such as #1 is asking for a negative outcome. Conversely, inquiring how you may be able to further assist shows that you are ready and willing to address anything else the customer needs.

7. Time is of the essence

Inbox zero often causes us to envisage an assembly line environment of productivity. The truth is that catching up to the queue grants you time for the most meaningful conversations. A quick reply will never go out of style.

In the case of an unhappy customer, a speedy response goes from *nice* to *necessary*—complaints are a different beast that benefit from being resolved as soon as possible.

A customer leaving a feature request won't sweat the fact that it took you a day to respond. Customers who are in a "pulling my hair out" situation want a resolution yesterday. Make responding to them a priority.

It can be useful to set up a Folder separate from the main support queue where you can filter less-than-ecstatic messages. Here, the team can see immediately which emails are from customers who need help right away.

Get the answer right the first time, but know that if there is ever a situation where speed takes a priority, it's in turning the metaphorical frown upside-down.

8. Verify the resolution

Have you ever submitted something through an online form, and after you hit submit there wasn't a single confirmation on whether or not anything had

happened?

It's incredibly frustrating. You don't have a clue where your issue—and any hope of resolving it—stands.

The same principle applies when <u>communicating with customers</u>. You want to be absolutely sure that the customer is clear on the resolution that occurred and that it met his or her needs. If you're not ending your responses with an inviting question, you may be creating unnecessary trouble.

"Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you—I'm happy to help!"

That's a good place to start. Even a simple, "Are you all set?" will do.

9. Treat customers with genuine respect

Customers want to be treated with respect. The day you stop talking to them like regular people is the day you lose touch and relevance. After that, you start losing customers.

So don't talk to them like a corporate stiff—this is a conversation, not "correspondence." However, also avoid the flipside, which is pandering through pleasantry. It's disingenuous to act like you can force your good mood down an unhappy customer's throat. Worse yet, it's downright creepy.
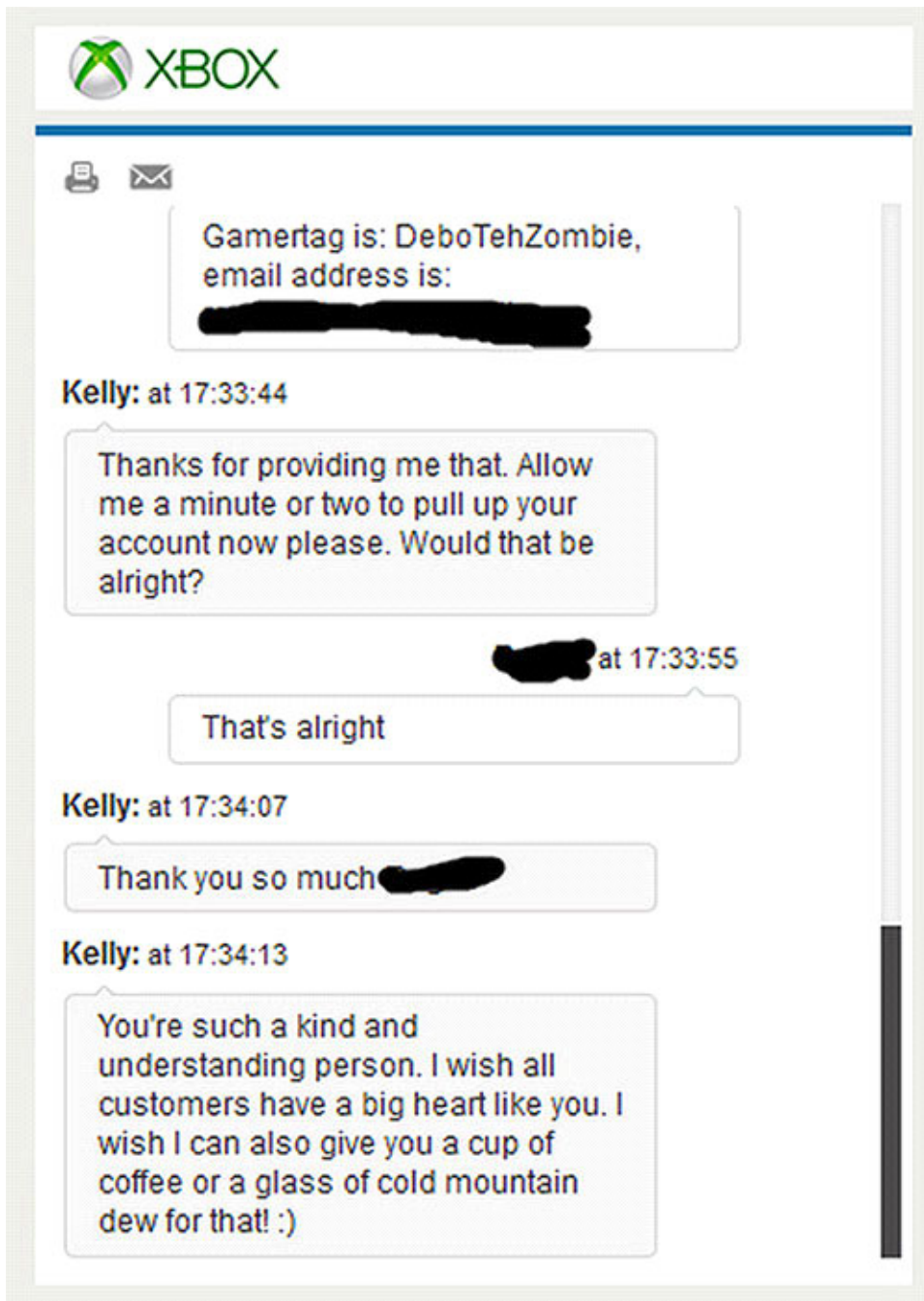
Please — spare me your insincerity.

Providing great support means finding a demeanor comfortable to the people you are serving, no matter the situation. Justin, our support lead, describes it

as such:

- We do not offer up platitudes. We are not obnoxiously bubbly, cheery, or "zestful."

- We don't wage a campaign of aggressive happiness. We do not offer foot massages or roll out the red carpet for people who treat our team members poorly (it's a two-way street).

- Help Scout is fond of the Ritz-Carlton principle, to be "Ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." We hold doors, offer a strong handshake, and will pass on the last piece of pie—unless it's pumpkin.

We care about the customer experience, top to bottom, but that doesn't mean we behave like a caricature. It means being consistently helpful and unquestionably genuine.

10. Don't drag out a lost cause

If a customer wants to cancel his account, do it right away. Nothing makes for a bitter departure quite like running your customers through the gauntlet as they try to leave.

Winning customers back with exceptional service is fundamental, but when people already have one foot out the door, you're better off letting the parting be as frictionless as possible. Learn what you can, see if there is a way to resolve the issue, and accept the outcome if there isn't.

Customers aren't necessarily gone for good just because they cancel their accounts once. Hassling upon exit, however, will assure they never return.

11. CARP Diem to resolve complaints

A really useful method for consistently handling upset customers can be found

in Robert Bacal's book, _If It Wasn't for the Customers I'd Really Like this Job_.
Bacal's practices are known as the CARP method, which consists of:

- Control

- Acknowledge

- Refocus

- Problem solve

In other words, take _control_ of the situation with language that shows you are
ready to handle concerns and don't intend to play games. _Acknowledge_ that
you completely understand your customer's concerns and won't be brushing
them off.

Next, _refocus_ away from the customer's emotions to the solution at hand,
outlining how you'll take care of it. Finally, _solve the problem_, confirming that
everything has been resolved to the customer's satisfaction.

Take your customer complaints seriously

You deserve no more respect than you are willing to give others…except in
customer support, _you're_ the professional. You do have to learn to be the rock
for your team. In turn, your team needs to look out for you.

Sometimes support needs support, and sometimes you just need to
remember that not every customer can be made happy. Stay positive; the
next pleasant conversation is just around the corner.