

How to Have a Tough Conversation with Your Customer

Your business is rolling. Your products are getting to your customers on time. Everything is working just the way you promised it would. Your customers pay their bills on time. No complaints. The bond between you and your customers could not be stronger.

Then something happens. (You knew it would, right?)

Trouble can come from any direction. A delayed product shipment causes a customer to miss a deadline. A salesperson (maybe even you!) promises more than your company could deliver. A customer finds a defect in one of your products that needs replacing right away.

We all know that setbacks are going to occur in business. Setbacks that strain relations between you and your customer. Setbacks that can cause anger and mistrust to build. Will this mean the end of a once profitable relationship? Not necessarily...

When tensions rise between you and a customer, it may be time for a tough conversation. A time to clear the air and address the problems that are causing trouble. But how do you keep a difficult conversation from becoming a full-scale argument that could permanently damage relations with your customer? Here are 4 tips to get you through the hard talks that can make or break your business.

1. Communicate early and often. Many of us avoid difficult conversations, hoping that problems resolve themselves. That rarely happens. But you can keep small problems from becoming big problems by addressing them quickly. Let your customer know right away that you recognize the problem, and that you're working to make it right. Keep them updated so they know what's happening. Don't keep your customer guessing about what you're doing to make things right.
2. Look at the situation from the customer's viewpoint. Your first reaction will be to assess what the problem means to your company—lost profits, prestige, or productivity. But your customer has similar concerns. Approach your conversations with an eye toward solving your customer's problems and quieting their concerns. Take responsibility. A company representative may need to stay at the customer's site to oversee the problem's resolution. Do what it takes to fix things with your customer, then clean things up at your end.
3. Leave the corporate doublespeak behind. Speak clearly and get to the point. Don't say, "Apparently, part X is failing to meet desired effectiveness quotas in real-world applications." Instead, try, "Part X isn't working right. We're going to replace it." People rightly see doublespeak as an attempt to cloud the issues and avoid responsibility. Say what you mean. Don't leave any doubt in your customer's mind.

4. Leave the door open for more conversations. Remember, the problem isn't solved until your customer thinks it is. Even after you've had a hard discussion, your customer is likely to have questions and unresolved issues. Make it clear that you are available to answer questions as they arise. Don't take offense if your customer isn't pleasant to deal with at the time. Stress makes all of us do things we wouldn't normally do. Realize it's the situation, not you, that is upsetting the customer.

Of course, the best way to handle difficult times with customers is to avoid them in the first place. But that's not always possible. If you remember these simple tips, you can get through rough patches with your customer relationships as strong as, or stronger than, they ever were.