

So you have a problem...that's great!

By Bob 'Idea Man' Hooey, AS

So you have a problem, that's great! Are you crazy? Actually...NO! Someone once told me **that I'd get paid or determine my value, by my ability to solve problems.**

If it was easy, everyone would be doing it, and the competition would be intense. But, as most customers will tell you; most businesses are not in the problem-solving field. Your ability to solve your client's problems will be directly related to the number of sales and continued growth of your firm. The more successfully, and **creatively you solve these problems**, the more referrals and fans you'll see. The more productive you are personally in being a solution oriented owner, manager, or employee will dramatically affect your paycheck and career path.

I've learned a **simple 4-stage process for dealing with problems**. This is an effective way to deal **creatively** with customer complaints and concerns as well as other areas of your business and life. These ideas also work with creative and strategic planning, or in everyday problem solving.

Since so many of my clients and audiences have a need to be effective in dealing with customers I've written from that perspective. This section is excerpted from my new book, "Why didn't I THINK of that?" and was included in "Secrets of Effective Customer Service" for obvious reasons.

1. Invest time making sure you UNDERSTAND the problem.
2. The key to understanding is to IDENTIFY the real cause.
3. Take time to fully explore and DISCUSS possible solutions.
4. Take action to SOLVE or resolve the problem.

"The Secret to Effective Customer Service" is to go thru this process with your clients. After the problem has been successfully resolved, **go the extra mile**. By that I mean, doing something unexpected to assist the client or to show them you appreciate the opportunity to prove your commitment to his wellbeing. This will help turn an angry or frustrated client into a fan, or better yet...a champion for you and your business.

Stage One: Understanding the problem: often a problem is a perception of a difference of what we expected to happen and what actually happened. Here are 3 action steps to help.

1. Gather ALL the facts. Be thorough and investigate. Let the client talk!
2. Listen carefully, and don't be defensive. Wait until they've finished talking and ask more questions to draw them out, to find out their REAL concerns.
3. Rephrase or repeat the problem back to the client to make sure you've heard it correctly and understand what needs to be resolved. Agree on this stage.

It's important at this stage to make sure you don't fall into the trap of denying or trying to avoid the problem. Or worse yet, blaming or attacking someone else, or demonstrating the same negative emotions in response to a customer's complaint. Just listen and get the facts!

Stage Two: Identify the Cause of the Problem: You might ask yourself or your client a few questions to find out what may have caused the problem.

1. What has happened? Listen and ask questions. True assessment of current situation.
2. What should have happened? Ask questions and listen carefully. Was perception a problem?
3. What went wrong? This is where you start partnering with the client.

Keep in mind the true cost of an unhappy client. What future purchases could you expect from this client? What future business this client could influence? What the problem at hand costs to rectify?

From experience problems generally often fall into 4 major areas:

1. Mechanics or Function - product or service failed to work as expected.
2. Assembly or use - someone didn't use it correctly or put it together correctly.
3. The People Factor - we make mistakes in how we do something or how we deal with a client.
4. Client EGO - how this PROBLEM makes them look (good or bad) in their eyes and the eyes of their friends and families.

Stage Three: Explore and DISCUSS possible solutions. This is possibly the most critical part in the client satisfaction/problem solving process. Here is where we need to fully focus and objectively look at the challenge we've partnered with the client to solve. Here again are a few action steps.

1. Suggest options. Take time to explore ALL the options that might effectively help solve this problem or at least minimize the impact.
2. Ask your customer for their ideas. Very often, they have a solution in mind, or have some good input that will help you mutually resolve it to their satisfaction. If they are a partner in the decision, they will help make it work and will be more inclined to be happier with the results. **Their satisfaction will result in referrals for you!**
3. Agree on the best solution or course of action. After you've fully explored the options, make sure you both agree on what and when you will do to resolve it. **THEN DO IT!**

Stage Four: Take ACTION to resolve the problem. This is the completion stage that builds a foundation for a potential long-term relationship with your formerly dissatisfied client. Make this a priority focus for your firm. Once you've agreed on what needs to be done, move heaven and earth to do it, and do it better and quicker than you've promised. Remember, they are watching to make sure you were serious about making them happy. This is your chance to prove your commitment. Again, three action steps.

1. Physically remove the cause of the problem or take steps to retrain if personnel.
2. Take corrective action to substitute, replace or repair the product or service.

3. Ask the client if they are satisfied with the changes and action you've taken.

Going the extra mile. This is where you cement the relationship by doing something extra, something totally unexpected by the client. Show them you care and are concerned about the inconvenience they've experienced.

One final note: **Use your complaints as a source of product or service development.** Each one is an opportunity for you to learn how to better serve your clients, refine your service or improve your product in the market place. This is also an opportunity to expand your business or service by using solutions as stepping stones, or business building blocks.

Yesterday's problems are today's new and improved products or services. Want to be a creativity leader? Then learn from each lesson your clients give you. This is an opportunity for you to build a strong foundation for success into the next millennium. **Don't miss the lesson. It might be a "v-e-r-y" valuable one!**

A personal note from Bob

I hope I've been able to share with you some creative approaches to problem solving or strategic planning. I appreciate the opportunity to exercise my creativity and learn together with my audiences. Often, the lessons we discuss, and the ideas generated help me in refining my approach and my program content.

I would challenge you to use these tips and techniques in your day to day operations, as well as in your personal life. I think you'll find them helpful.

Remember there is always a creative solution! And share these ideas with your clients and co-workers, so they can take advantage of ways to make their lives more productive and less stressful.

Would you take a moment from time to time to share your success stories with me? This will serve a number of purposes. I'd like to know how this material has helped you or your clients; and your successes might just help me add new material or keep this material current and fresh. My e-mail is: bob@ideaman.net

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