



# Complaint

## What Can Your Angry Customers Teach You?

Instead of seeing complaints as attacks, see what you can learn from them.

*By Joe Curcillo*

If it hasn't already happened to you, it will soon enough. Your phone rings, and you're suddenly faced with an irate customer. Perhaps it's a client who is unhappy with your organization's services or a donor or board member who feels slighted and unappreciated.

Whoever it is, the way you handle the next few seconds will determine whether the caller will continue to support your organization. Not only that, but your response may be the difference between whether the customer ends up criticizing or praising your organization throughout the social media world. If the animosity is great enough, the fallout could cause serious damage to your organization's reputation.

So, how should you respond? It's a tough situation, but it will be easier if you're already prepared. Preparedness comes by having the structure in mind that will allow you to control the situation. As you listen to the complaint, pay attention to how the caller became disgruntled, and match their words to the organizational structure and discipline that you have in place. Many times the caller has reached your desk because someone in the chain of command failed to listen and address their concerns.

Let's begin with the approach. How you manage your response will define the experience as educational or confrontational. Keep in mind that the best way to initiate control is to take the high ground – not just the high road of virtue and doing the right thing, but the high ground as a vantage point to observe the situation as a whole. Prepare to remove yourself from the fray and look at the big picture. The best means of accomplishing this is to remember the following rules.

### **Don't speak until you've truly listened.**

The opposite of speaking isn't listening – it's waiting to speak. Listening is a separate task, and in fact is an art. If you're waiting to speak, you're preparing to address the other person with words.

Step back, and let the speaker talk. As you listen, don't formulate your responses. Instead, follow the speaker with an eye toward understanding the nature of the accusations and allegations.

Resist the all-too-natural urge to react defensively. Effective communication hinges on your understanding of their argument, not on the merits of your own. There's no benefit to pointing out your position until you've heard theirs.

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Taking control requires you to pay attention so you can use all you’ve heard as you map out your proposed solution. Adopting the other person’s arguments in your solution will make it much more difficult for a person to rebuff your offer of resolution.

## Identify the true nature of the complaint and the complainant.

There are many reasons why a person will complain. For example:

*Some people are simply disappointed with your entire industry.* Perhaps they’ve heard stories about fraud and inefficiencies in the nonprofit sector and have become suspicious of all nonprofit organizations. In such cases, you need to set yourself apart from the herd and let the speaker know that you care.

*Some complaints are born from a lack of clear expectations.* Explore people’s concerns and guide them back to a more realistic path.

*Many complaints are rooted in poor communication.* Sometimes people misunderstand a fundamental fact, and this confusion gets them off on the wrong foot. It’s essential that you speak to these complainants as you would to a friend. Explain the situation in clear, simple vocabulary without jargon, but don’t allow yourself to come across as condescending. Remain social and human as you address your customer.

*People may be upset about something different* from your first assumptions. Never assume you know how they feel or why they feel that way. Ask plenty of questions to clarify the root cause of the problem. You may find that they’re mad about something deeper than what they’re complaining about or even what they think the trouble is.

*The most common hostile customer – and the easiest to deal with – is the one who just wants to be heard.* You’ve probably already dealt with people like this. They express every detail of their complaint to every person in your organization. They tell their story to the parking lot attendant as they park their car and to each person they encounter en route to the manager’s office. Their repeated rehearsal of the story should be your first indication that all they need is understanding and reassurance. They want someone to listen; step up and make that person you.

## Focus on areas in which you and your organization can improve.

Learn. Even the most irrational or self-absorbed customers can teach you valuable tools to improve service. As you listen, consider steps you can take to keep situations like this one from happening again. By looking for areas of improvement

in each and every conversation, you’ll not only actively listen, but you’ll enjoy the opportunity to grow and become better.

## Ask yourself these questions.

Consider the following checklist as a starting point. Obviously, your organization may have specific questions or concerns that you should also consider. Allow these thoughts to operate as a springboard into your next irate customer moment.

**With whom** have they spoken?

**Have they allowed their anger** to fester?

**What remedies** have failed?

**Is the problem real** or imagined?

**Is the problem related to a personality conflict** with the representative with whom they’ve been working?

**What do they expect?** Are their expectations reasonable? Are these expectations something you can address?

**How many people** have they spoken with at your organization? Have these people given them sound advice or bad advice?

**Is their disappointment** with your organization, a specific situation, or a specific person?

**Have they been given** good advice but the problem rests with their inability to understand and listen?

**What can I learn** from the situation to improve my organization? 

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## More Lessons in Communication

For more insights, see these articles at [NonprofitWorld.org](http://NonprofitWorld.org):

**Are You Delighting Your Customers?** (Vol. 18, No. 5)

**How to Fix Communication Breakdowns** (Vol. 29, No. 1)

**Eight Steps to Managing Conflict** (Vol. 20, No. 4)

**Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener** (Vol. 37, No. 1)

**How Jargon Undermines Communication** (Vol. 27, No. 2)

**Seven Kinds of Listeners & How to Approach Them** (Vol. 39, No. 2)

**Unleash the True Power of Conversation** (Vol. 37, No. 2)

**Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success** (Vol. 35, No. 3)

**Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication** (Vol. 24, No. 6)