

Chapter 1

Interacting with Customers



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Before I can begin discussing any type of interoffice, general, or business communication, I have to point out one very important fact. This fact is that, whether you realize it or not, the foundation of all IT and general communication in the professional world is based on customer interaction. This is because a customer is much more than just a person you deal with in a retail environment. A customer is any person you interact with who could stand to grant you and your company potential benefits. This includes consumers, other businesses, service providers, consultants, and a myriad of other individuals.

Remember: A large portion of your exam is going to be on customer interaction, and it will probably involve situations that are similar to those listed here. It's a good idea to read about the interaction, collect your own thoughts on how the situation could best be resolved, and then take the suggestions and analysis into consideration.

This chapter breaks down into the following seven different scenarios, each dealing with some of the most commonly occurring issues in professional communication:

- Scenario 1: The Angry Customer
- Scenario 2: Rude and Ruder
- Scenario 3: Impatience: Not Quite a Virtue
- Scenario 4: Assertive Intelligence
- Scenario 5: The Challenged Customer[
- Scenario 6: A Quiet Case
- Scenario 7: Easing Tension

The Angry Customer

Here's the hard-and-fast truth: no matter what you're doing, whether you're in information technology, business, support, engineering, or working at a fast-food restaurant, chances are that you're going to run into an angry customer. As much as we don't like to deal with angry people, they are just one of those tough facts of life that we as IT technicians have to learn to deal with. Fortunately, the trick to dealing with angry people is that most of the time they are upset, frustrated, angry, or just generally agitated, but not with us. They are agitated with the *situation*. In this scenario, you're going to see what it's like to deal with an angry customer, how best to resolve the situation, and how you can turn an angry customer into a friend of your organization for life.

Scenario

It's 9 A.M. and you've just opened the gates to a local computer store where you have recently been placed into a position of authority. As the sole A+ Certified Technician, not only are you in charge of ensuring that all of your technical tickets and requests are fulfilled, but you are also responsible for customer support issues involving technical matters that the normal customer service representatives cannot field.

After setting up your work area and greeting two of your newly arriving coworkers, you are disturbed from the assembly room by a frantic and frightened coworker who bursts into your back room, breathlessly saying, "There's someone at the front counter screaming at the top of his lungs and demanding to speak with a person who 'knows what he's doing!'" Surprised, you walk out to the sales floor to investigate.

Upon arriving at the sales floor, you immediately notice an incredibly large and furious-looking man, hunching over a sales terminal and glaring at your second coworker. This coworker, equally as frightened as the first, turns to you for support with a pleading look on his face. The customer catches on to this instantly and turns to address you, yelling, "You better know what the heck you're talking about!"

Stunned, you stammer for just a second, but you are able to get out, "Yes, sir. How is it that I can help you?"

Barely allowing you to get your statement out, the customer yells, "I've had a really bad night and your piece of junk computer is broken. What are you going to do about it?" He then stares at you directly, further urging on a confrontation and intimidating other coworkers in your store.

Background

Although we'd like them to be the exception, angry customers in the modern workplace have become sort of the norm. When unfortunate events happen to people, they tend to react negatively toward the people is closest to them. In this particular case, it's happening in a retail or personal contact-oriented business. However, this happens even more often on the phone or via distance (as in an e-mail), because although only a few people might have the courage to approach you with an "I'm angry!" attitude, many more people feel that not seeing someone face to face allows them to vent their anger at will. Therefore, it's important to remember that while customers like this might require the most attention and the gentlest of kid gloves when you're interacting with them, these ideas should be put into practice when you're dealing with all of your customers. It will help your customer performance evaluations and might just make someone who's boiling on the inside feel a bit better.

Overview

Before I talk about being in the position of dealing with an angry person, put yourself in the shoes of Fred, the angry customer. Fred has just bought a brand-new laptop from Super Company X. The laptop is fast and stylish, and it's got every new feature Fred could ever ask for. To top it off, this laptop even comes with a nice briefcase he can use to carry it back and forth to work.

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Unfortunately, last night Fred spent his entire night preparing a business presentation for his company. After he had spent three hours writing the presentation, the computer screen went blank and the computer refused to turn back on. Panicked, Fred has come to your computer store. At this point, his hardware, work, and job are on the line. He's tired, scared, and more than a little frustrated.

As stated before, Fred is not necessarily angry with you or your company. In fact, it's the opposite of that. Fred is actually hopeful that your company will be able to help him with this problem that he has encountered. In reality, Fred is angry with the company that manufactured the product and is upset with said product's usability. He has the sincerest hope that your company, and more importantly you, will be able to help him. That's the first thing you have to reassure him about.

Key Concepts

When most people without certification training are presented with this situation, they naturally respond with one of four options. These options generally depend on the type of person, but they can be broken down into:

- Lecturing
- Fighting
- Resolving
- Helping

None of these thoughts is necessarily illogical, but one of them is certainly the best approach for dealing with an angry person. Let's consider all these options and discuss why each of them is or is not a good idea.

Lecturing Fred About His Tone

Of all the options presented here, this is by far the worst one. When people are angry, they don't want to hear that they are sounding angry. They want to hear that their anger has gotten the attention that they desire and that you are going to help them with their problem. Furthermore, this doesn't let the customer know that you're going to try to help him, which is what he really wants.

Fighting Fire with Fire

If you respond to rudeness with rudeness, you're not going to help anyone, especially yourself. Most people who respond with this attitude to a situation believe that whoever is addressing them in this fashion is insulting them. This isn't necessarily true. One could actually argue that when someone is angry with an employee in a retail or remote situation it is because the person believes that the employee is capable of helping them but unwilling. This indicates a great deal of unspoken respect.

Getting Straight to the Issue

Of the options discussed so far, this would seem like the most appropriate one; however, it has some flaws. First, it doesn't necessarily tell the customer that you are going to help him out. In fact, it indicates to the customer that you are already classifying him along with hundreds of other cases you have already seen. Second, the customer hasn't explained the problem yet. He's barely begun to discuss it. Already asking questions indicates that you believe you have already solved the problem and, in his view, are insulting his intelligence.

Telling Him You'll Help

Although it may seem fairly obvious, the best thing you can tell an angry person is that his problem is going to be fixed. Truth be told, he does not want to be there and you do not want him to be upset. After you've established this, the customer can feel comforted in you as a person and begin to tell you what you need to know to help him.

Resolution

Most frustrated and angry customers just want to have their issue resolved. Furthermore, they want you to address them in a way that they find comforting and to investigate their issue with concern. This simple tactic and mind-set can save you hundreds of hours of argument, frustration, headaches, and annoyance, as well as making someone a friendly customer of yours for life. However, there are a lot of additional tactics you can use, including using passive voice and speaking in a pleasant tone.

Passive Voice

The simplest way to remove blame from any situation is to discuss the problem as if it just happened by chance. This is accomplished by using passive voice. Simply defined, passive voice is voice that is not active but acted upon.

Although that may not seem immediately clear, it's actually fairly simple to understand. It means that whenever you speak about action involving a subject, you speak as if the subject has had an action impressed upon it, versus making the action itself. To clarify, consider these few examples:

Active (Normal) Voice

"So, you disconnected the motherboard from the power supply?"

Passive Voice

"So, the power supply was disconnected from the motherboard?"

Active (Normal) Voice

"Did you buy the right type of DIMM for your motherboard?"

Passive Voice

"Is the DIMM that was bought the correct type?"

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This tactic succeeds in removing any type of personal blame and instead places the blame on an unknown entity. Although in reality it's normally still the user's fault or issue, the language used removes any personal liability.

Pleasant Tone

Remember the old saying, "You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar"? It's true. Customers who are angry always respond better to people who are polite and courteous. It takes away any ammo they have to become angrier. If you think back to the times when you were extremely irate and were calmed down, chances are that the person you were dealing with was very understanding and spoke in a way that you found soothing in some form or another. It's important to understand the effect this can have on customers in a retail or remote environment and to effect a semblance of it on a day-to-day basis. You'll find that it goes a long way toward making not only your customers a bit easier to deal with, but also your friends and family.

Skills for the A+ Exam

Here's an example of the type of questions you will see about angry customers on the A+ exam:

1. A furious customer slams his hands down on the desk in front of you and demands that you pay for the computer that he believes you broke. Which of the following is the best statement to calm the customer?
 - A. OK, sir. Let me see if it's broken and we'll go from there.
 - B. I'll be certain to let my management know to help you.
 - C. OK, sir. How much does that product cost? Maybe we could help.
 - D. Sir, I'm more than willing to help. Let me see what I can do to fix the situation.

Answer A: Incorrect. This answer leads the customer to become angry. He will think, "What do you mean you'll CHECK to see if it's broken?"

Answer B: Incorrect. This answer makes the customer believe that you can't help him with anything and that he should be speaking with your manager.

Answer C: Incorrect. This answer makes the customer think that your company is cheap and will only help him if it's in the budget.

Answer D: Correct. This informs the customer that you are willing to help and try your best. That's all the customer can really ever hope for.

Rude and Ruder

I don't know about you, but I really just don't like rude people. I don't think anybody actually does. They're not the sort of people you want to have over for dinner, or the sort of folks you'd like to call friend. Unfortunately, whether or not we want to associate with them, rude people

have a weird habit of just showing up where we don't want them. Take this real-life scenario as an example. The names, places, and people have been changed to protect the innocent (or perhaps I should say the guilty), but the truth is still intact.

Scenario

You've been working at your retail computer business for six months and you think you've finally started to get a grip on how things work. You're familiar with the inventory, you've gotten to know your coworkers on a more personal level, and you think that your manager approves of your performance up to today.

Today, in order to get ahead on the business inventory that is going to be conducted at the end of this month, you've decided to start counting some of the currently existing parts and computers that are normally not used and then place them into a safer area where they will not be exposed to the potential of theft or misplacement. This way, you can cut down on the time you're going to have to spend on your inventory management later.

Suddenly, just as you've begun your project and started to unpack a great many boxes onto the main floor, the door to the front office opens and an older-looking man in his late 60s walks into the store. He then makes his way directly up to the front counter, looks you in the eye, and says, "This place looks like a complete mess. Don't you know how to run a business?"

You immediately apologize for the situation and ask how you can help. He then responds by saying, "I'll tell you how you can help—you can clean up this mess. Until then, I'm not sure if I really want to be caught shopping here. This place isn't up to my standards, and I don't think it's up to yours, either."

Slightly frustrated, you nod but maintain a professional appearance. You then say, "OK, sir. Well, I'm sorry for the appearance of the store, but do you think that you could still give me an idea of what you're looking for? After all, you're already here and I'm willing to help."

Chuckling, the man says, "Trying to sales pitch me now, huh? Fat chance of that happening, punk."

Background

One of the more "interesting" things about working in support, customer service, or anything involving the service industry is that we as professionals are exposed to a wide variety of people from an uncountable number of backgrounds. This is important to note because while you might find the behavior of others to be rude, it may not be intended that way. Granted, in this case it's pretty obvious—the customer has a fairly large chip on his shoulder. However, that isn't always the case.

In some places in the United States, a common way to joke is by complaining about situations. It doesn't matter if something is perfect or if they don't have any real complaints at all, they will still complain. Because of this, it's important that you weave an aura of complete and total understanding about you before you begin to deal with any sort of customer. If they do something that is rude or upsetting, don't fret. After all, you're only going to be dealing with them for a limited amount of time. Furthermore, you can also consider that this might just be their way of expressing their beliefs and, by their standards, may not be rude.

Overview

The first thing I have to point out in this situation is that your customer is obviously upset. The right thing was done here, in that before the actual situation of the customer was dealt with, an apology was made. But even after that apology was made, the customer continued to complain and make acid remarks.

Personally, I find situations like this fairly tough to deal with. You almost want to go up to them and say, “What is it that you WANT!?” In fact, I’ve even seen someone do that at the workplace. And while I wouldn’t recommend it, it actually had pretty good results.

In the section that follows, you’re going to see some of the basic temptations to avoid in this situation (such as raising your voice and asking them what they want) and then look at some of the reasons that they have this demeanor. By reviewing these facts, you should be fairly well armed to deal with a customer who makes you as upset as this one. But be warned, there is no easy fix-all for dealing with different types of people; there are only general guidelines. Each situation is unique, and you have to use your best judgment of what will and will not work.

Key Concepts

Although it would normally be a good idea to understand your customer’s perspective, in this case the customer is openly hostile. With an openly hostile customer, it’s going to become extremely difficult to obtain information from them. Therefore, you have to consider the possible avenues of approach you have to communicate with them.

Temptations to Avoid

People like this customer can bring out the worst in us. Because of that, it’s important to remember that there are certain temptations that should just be avoided. In particular, you should make sure that you do not ask someone to calm down, and that you do not refuse service or become equally argumentative. The following will explain how these concepts can turn a bad situation into an even worse one very quickly:

Asking Them to Calm Down This is a *bad* idea. Have you ever had someone ask you to calm down when you’re angry? Did it work? When people are angry and you ask them to calm down they just instantly think, “Hey! Aren’t you listening to me? I’m angry! I want attention.”

In the real world (that is, the nonbusiness world) you don’t really have to placate everyone you meet. If someone wants attention when they’re angry, you can always choose to ignore them or just wait until they’ve calmed down after an indeterminate period of time. In business, you don’t have that choice, especially in retail.

Refusal Boy, it would be great if you could just say, “I don’t feel like dealing with you today, Mr. Customer. Thank you and have a very nice day.” I think it would save everyone a lot of headaches. Truth be told, I’ve actually seen people do this. They get to the point where they don’t want to deal with a customer and then they simply tell the customer to go away.

There's a simple reason you can't do this: collateral damage. If you allow one individual to walk away angry, that customer creates 10 more who will not want to deal with you in the future. People like to talk, and you deciding that you don't want to deal with a person could be just about the worst event in that person's day—and you'd better be darn sure that they're going to want to tell someone about it.

Being Rude Back You know, I don't think I need to get into this one. But, just in case, it almost goes without saying that you can't be rude to customers—no matter what they do. If you're like me, you've actually been the rude customer once or twice in your life and dealt with someone who was rude back. You've also probably dealt with someone who remained professional and calm throughout the entire incident.

To this day, I can still remember walking into an unnamed cell phone store and chewing out the manager. He stood there and took every bad name, insult, and angry complaint I could throw out and just responded with kindness and understanding. It really took the wind out of my sails. On the other hand, just the other day I went to go buy a pretzel at another unnamed business and I wasn't served. After two minutes of that, I asked for service. The attendant responded with "Yeah," and then continued to baste and ready a fresh garlic pretzel (which happened to be the exact one I wanted at that moment). Things like that stick with you. The bottom line is don't be rude, no matter what somebody else does.

Remember, these are things to be avoided at all cost. No matter how upset you get, don't give in to these temptations! Not only are they damaging to your customer, but they also can be damaging to you and your business. Instead, consider the discussion in the following section.

Resolution

There are a lot of reasons why people tend to be rude, but they usually boil down to one of these two things:

- Frustrated
- Culturally different

Frustrated

Of the two problems, frustrated is by far the easiest one to handle. Frustrated people just want their problem to be fixed! Remain calm, do your best to help the customer, and know that you're going to make them have a good day if you fix their issue.



Focus on the customer. Let the customer know that you're concerned about their problem. They will think better of you and appreciate that you're doing everything you can to help them.

Culturally Different

You don't need someone like me to tell you that there are a lot of different types of people out there. In the United States alone, people in the South tend to think and act differently than people in the North. People from California don't usually vote the same way as people from Texas. The trick is that you can do a few things to make sure that everybody stays happy:

Use acceptable language. There are certain things you can and cannot say to people. Some of the language that you need to avoid using are slang words or phrases, derogatory terms, acronyms, and just about anything that would make someone who doesn't come from the same background as you feel uncomfortable.

Avoid excessive body language. It's always a safe bet to not make many hand movements when dealing with a customer. Unless you're a master of empathy (which most of us aren't), you can't say for certain how someone is going to react to a particular gesture. They could feel threatened, insulted, or even sexually harassed by an action you make. Consider that while such expressions as a good old-fashioned "thumbs up" might be considered friendly and encouraging in the United States, it is considered to be one of the rudest gestures on the planet in many other cultures.

Skills for the A+ Exam

Here's an example of the type of questions you will see about rude customers on the A+ exam:

2. A user informs you that he has been waiting on hold for a very long time and wants to be spoken to immediately. You currently have three other customers who have been holding longer and are also reading an e-mail saying that you have to log out of your workstation in five minutes, forcing you to place your current customers back into the hold queue. What is your best response?
 - A. I'll be glad to help you immediately, sir.
 - B. I apologize, sir. We will be with you as soon as we can. It shouldn't be much longer. Again, I apologize for the inconvenience.
 - C. OK, no problem. I have to leave in just a few minutes, but is there a chance that it's a tiny problem? I'd like to help.
 - D. Sir, I'm more than willing to help. Let me see what I can do to fix the situation. Or if I can't fix it, I'll get you to someone who can.

Answer A: Incorrect. You can't do this. If you start, you probably won't be able to finish this in five minutes and won't be able to log out of your terminal.

Answer B: Correct. Sometimes you have to tell a customer the hard truth, even if they're rude or upset.

Answer C: Incorrect. I have a bit of a soft heart, so I've tried to do this more than once. Unfortunately, it never works. The problem is *always* a big problem. But even if it isn't, it's not a good practice to get into. The A+ exam is going to ask you questions like this. Be prepared.

Answer D: Incorrect. This is a great distracter. You're being polite, kind, and very helpful. Unfortunately, this response doesn't account for the fact that you have people currently holding and that all your other associates are busy. Be sure to watch out for this type of thing on the real exam.

Impatience: Not Quite a Virtue

I bet if I were to sit down and have a one-on-one talk with you about being impatient, you'd probably confess to me that there's been at least one time in your social or working life that you've been anxious about *something*. For most people, it's been a lot more than just once. In fact, it's probably happened a couple of hundred times.

Patience is a hard thing to master. Even for the most calm, confident, and level-headed people you will ever meet, patience is just one of those things in life that takes a lifetime to be able to control and two lifetimes to master. One of the "joys" of IT is that you have to learn how to do it as soon as you start your position. Unfortunately, your customers don't exactly have to share your state of mind.

Scenario

It's Christmas, the busiest time of the year at your small office. Everyone has built up a good share of vacation, personal leave, and even a little sick time that they've been talking about using now for the past month. Truth be told, you've even arranged to take some time off yourself. After all, what good is having paid vacation if you don't use it?

As a result of the upcoming vacation, everyone is in a hurry to pack things up and get ready to leave the office. Employees have been submitting jobs to the servers, locking down workstations, and doing their best to get documents signed off by the boss before their leave begins.

On the morning of your last day in the office before your vacation starts, you receive an early phone call from your supervisor, notifying you that the office Exchange server has just gone down and you need to rush to the office immediately. Upon your arrival, you quickly realize that the server has been infected with an extremely malicious virus and that it's going to take you hours to fix. To top it off, most of the crew is planning on taking a half day today and needs the equipment.

As soon as you finish the diagnosis, you receive another phone call from your supervisor: "Hey, it's Alan. Can you have that server back up in 30 minutes?"

Background

Someone once told me that if you want to get into IT to give yourself more free time, you're getting into the wrong business. I thought he was kidding at the time, but he turned out to be almost completely correct. IT is one of those businesses that, just like being a doctor or a lawyer, may require you to work at some very odd hours. Problems happen and they don't

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normally tend to just resolve themselves. Because of this, it's important to remember that there are going to be times when things go wrong. Unfortunately, they always seem to come at the wrong times, like holidays, weekends, or other times that we'd like to think about anything other than work.

As you read over this analysis, I encourage you to put yourself in a particular mind-set before you begin to think it over. That mind-set is that you are going to have to work very hard in IT and there are just times when work is going to take a long time. As simple as it sounds, that frame of thought will save you a lot of time and frustration if you can get yourself mentally prepared for it before it happens.

Overview

From the description of the condition of the office, you can easily tell that most people are anxious to have all their problems solved and be under way with the rest of the day. Just like it says in the beginning, who can really blame them? It's the holidays and they're all ready to take a break. The problem is, problems don't take breaks.

When you're involved with a situation like this in your business, you're going to need to consider a lot of factors: elements like time, complexity, workload, and just how generally difficult a problem is going to be to fix. You should take all of these factors into account and present your supervisor with what you consider to be a fairly reasonable timeframe. However, when you do that, you should also consider some of the key concepts listed next in this scenario when you're speaking to someone about a problem that won't just quickly disappear.

Key Concepts

There are many sides to the practice of being patient. Some of them come from the perspective of the customer/coworker and some from the perspective of the employee. The important thing to remember is that, as far as you are concerned, there is only one side that you have to worry about—yours.

Granted, you're going to have to be concerned with the customer's state of mind. You can't just ignore their feelings and continue on with the workday. (Since you've made it to this point of the chapter, you probably already understand that.) But the main idea is that customers are always going to have problems. Being impatient and in a hurry is just one of those problems that you have to learn to deal with for their benefit. Let's now take a look at a few things to keep in mind as you deal with an impatient customer.

The Problem Isn't Going Away

Just because a customer may want a problem to be instantly fixed, it doesn't mean that it's going to happen. Because of this, it's a good idea to let people know the severity of their problems. In the previous scenario, you were dealing with a complex server that had an extremely urgent and complex problem. Although the manager may want it done in 30 minutes, it probably isn't feasible. Furthermore, if you try to do what you can in 30 minutes and just turn the server back on, the problem will still be there.

Whenever possible, be up-front with your customer. If they ask for the unreasonable, professionally tell them that it's unreasonable. If someone came to you and said, "I need you to overhaul this V-8 engine in 10 minutes," you could easily tell them that you don't believe that you can overhaul the engine in 10 minutes. Instead, you'd need somewhere around a week (assuming, of course, you could work on cars in the first place).

Doing a Half-Job Will Be Worse Than Not Doing It at All

It's easy to tempt yourself into committing one of the cardinal sins of IT and, more importantly, one of the cardinal sins of business. The best advice you will probably ever receive in business is the following: never do a half-job. Don't just patch something together. Don't get something to the point that it works, but not very well. Get your task done to the point that what you were supposed to do was done *great*.

Your goal in everything you do in business is to get people to say, "Wow." If you don't accomplish that every single time you set out, it's not the end of the world. However, not trying to shoot for that goal every time you go out is just letting yourself down. If you fully grasp your potential and do everything you were gifted with, you will be able to churn out some amazing results. If something's worth doing, it's worth doing well.

Resolution

When dealing with impatient people, just remember that the key is to be polite and to do the best you can to solve their problem as quickly as possible, whether that involves abstract ideas or the traditional method of just working your way through their issue. At the end of the day, they are people just like you and they just want to have their situation taken care of. Remember that every time you deal with someone who is anxious or impatient about something, you have the opportunity to be the hero and solve problem quickly. Along the way, here are some good practices to keep in mind as you're solving these problems.

Be Extremely Polite

Being polite can go a long way to diffusing an impatient customer. As you've seen in previous scenarios, it's a disarming tactic to someone who is openly hostile or confrontational. In the case of someone who is extremely impatient, it is an almost miraculous tactic, and in the case of your superiors, it can actually score you a lot of brownie points.

If someone is anxious and ready to have something done immediately, they're most likely not going to act adversely if you say one of the following easy-to-memorize quotes:

- "I'll do my very best to get to you [or your problem] as soon as I can. Thank you for your patience."
- "Thank you, sir/ma'am. I'll be with you in just a moment."

Offer Alternatives

One of the most interesting things about the social issue of patience is that it only occurs if someone has a problem that they want attended to immediately. Whether that problem is personal or

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work related, it can be quickly diffused by thinking of a solution that the individual may not have considered.

When you have a customer or coworker who appears to be concerned about a particular issue, the best advice is to quickly ask them about their situation and see if you can think of any alternative solutions they may not have considered.

- “Mr. Boss, I think the server is going to be down for quite a while. Do you think it might be a better idea for us to queue up the e-mails on the backup Exchange server while I repair this one?”
- Or, in the retail world, “I’m currently with another customer, Mr. Customer. I’ll be with you as soon as I can, but if you need immediate assistance I can call a coworker from the back to come and help you.”

Skills for the A+ Exam

Here’s an example of the type of questions you will see about impatient customers on the A+ exam:

3. You are working on one of three priority help desk tickets when your supervisor calls and says that he has another priority ticket that has to be taken care of immediately. The tickets you currently have will probably already take you several hours. What is your best action?
 - A. Stop what you’re doing and take care of the ticket your supervisor has.
 - B. Stop what you’re doing and inform the supervisor of your situation.
 - C. Continue working on the ticket and suggest that it might be a better idea to hand the ticket to the second team; your office is at its max.
 - D. Continue working on the ticket and tell your supervisor that you think you can handle the situation, but make him aware that there is an issue.

Answer A: Incorrect. It’s a good idea to do what your boss tells you, but not at the sacrifice of your performance. You should also never stop working on an issue when you can continue diagnosing it.

Answer B: Incorrect. You should always keep your supervisor informed, but you shouldn’t stop working just to do that.

Answer C: Correct. This answer not only informs your supervisor of the situation, but also suggests an alternative for him. Your superiors will appreciate your understanding of their situation, and this will help them remember that you can handle difficult situations well.

Answer D: Incorrect. You should never tell a supervisor that you can do something but there may be problems attached to it. Supervisors want to hear that something either can or cannot be done.

Assertive Intelligence

Have you ever noticed how most of the people you meet in this world tend to be a little less smart than you? Most IT people know the feeling. It's not exactly an industry that attracts people who dislike an intellectual challenge. In fact, some of the smartest people you will ever meet are in this field . . . which is actually the problem.

A good portion of the time you'll be administering, assisting, or troubleshooting an issue with someone, they'll be a lot smarter than you are. On top of that, they'll probably be older, more experienced, and a great deal more connected. That makes it pretty tough to be the new IT guy sometimes.

Scenario

You're working in a call center environment for a local cable company and have just been promoted from a Level 1 support technician to a Level 2 support technician, and you couldn't be happier. Finally, you've stopped receiving phone calls that involve trivial things like unplugging the cable modem and plugging it back in. Now, you're starting to get involved with actual technical issues like subnetting, driver conflicts, failed hardware issues, and the sorts of thing that tech geeks just love! You're on the top of the company's tech food chain.

Sometime during the day you receive a phone call and you answer with a standard greeting. The customer responds with:

"Hi. I'm a consultant working for SmallBus, Inc. and it looks like their 2600 is having QoS issues. I'd like to set it up to be fed in from our backup cable modem here, but your DHCP server seems to keep assigning us new IP addresses every hour. Can you give us something static for a day until I can figure out what the issue is?"

Background

Most companies that you will work for in your career will have a whole range of employees with different skill levels. Because of this, there's a strong chance that you'll have someone else in your organization who is much more experienced in IT than you—or, if not more experienced, who will certainly have a larger knowledge base.

However, this isn't always the case. Many small companies will hire just one IT person, who will be in charge of virtually the entire business. This is a difficult situation to be in, because IT is so broad and the expectations of a sole IT person are extremely high. So, for those of you who are planning on working for a smaller company, pay especially close attention to this scenario—chances are that you will encounter it a lot as you deal with other companies that interact with your own.

Overview

There are a couple dead giveaways that you can look for regarding problems of a complex nature that have extremely experienced professionals asking about them:

- They immediately identify the problem without hesitation.
- The problem is narrow and self-contained, not broad and overarching.
- There is usually a specific request.

This makes it fairly easy to identify exactly what is wrong (assuming you can understand the technology) and move on to some of the tactics you can use to resolve the problem.

Key Concepts

First off, let's say you don't even know what a 2600 is. (I know that some of you might be saying, "Hey, Steve, it's a Cisco router. I know this stuff," but bear with me.) Second, let's also say that you're not familiar with IOS and how to configure Cisco networks. In case you don't know what IOS is in the first place, don't worry; you'll be fine. Now, let's analyze the conversation and take a look at the things you know before you even start to deal with the customer.

Someone who throws around Cisco terminology and consults for a living is probably a pretty intelligent, or at least technically experienced, person. Some key things to listen for in your customer or coworker's language are:

- Length of words
- Acronyms
- Technical terms
- Jargon usage

If the person consults for a living, they're going to know their way around the IT field, whether or not they've got all the certifications in the world. Make sure you avoid the following when dealing with a smart, experienced person:

- Avoid explaining the basics.
- Avoid overly long explanations.

Resolution

Since you'll come across this scenario pretty often, it's a good idea to prepare yourself for exactly what to do when and not if it presents itself. As a general guideline, you can get past the situation by doing two things: Concentrating on what they need and not using technical terms back.

Concentrate on What They Need

Experienced professionals are going to have a good idea of what they want before you even start diagnosing their issue. One of the best things you can do early in your evaluation is to find out exactly what they want from you. The more you understand what they want, the better you are going to be able to help them.

Don't Use Technical Terms Back

This one goes against what you might normally think. The guy called up, started spouting off terms, and is asking for something very technical. This is all true, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the person is going to understand everything you throw back at them. In this particular case, the person seems to be a Cisco expert. Say your DHCP server used Juniper technology, instead. Or, in the worst case, say the problem is actually because the person did something wrong in the first place.

Assume They're Dumb; Act Like They're Smart

This sounds mean and deceitful and, well, it sort of is. *However*, it's a good philosophy to adopt. People *really* like to feel as if they're intelligent, well spoken, and an absolute expert on the subject. Making them think otherwise can result in a lot of negative emotions, such as anger, sadness, or maybe even a little anxiety.

Furthermore, the person might know a little about a particular field, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're an expert. For the moment, you can feel safe to use some more technical terms and treat the person with a little more credit than you would a normal user, but it's best to stick to a common playing field.

Skills for the A+ Exam

Here's an example of the type of questions you will see about technically proficient customers on the A+ exam:

4. How should you respond to a customer who uses jargon?
 - A. Use the jargon back moderately.
 - B. Don't use it in return at all.
 - C. Use it heavily in return.
 - D. Ask the customer if they understand the terms, then use them heavily.

Answer A: Incorrect. While this might be appealing, jargon is just not a good idea in technical support. It can really confuse the issue.

Answer B: Correct. When in doubt, don't use it. That's the first rule of jargon, acronyms, and special terms. Whenever you're in technical support, you have to resort to the least common denominator.

Answer C: Incorrect. Young Skywalker, this is not the way of the Force. Never use acronyms, jargon, or special terms heavily!

Answer D: Incorrect. This is an interesting idea, but still not a good one. If you asked a customer about every single term, the two of you would be on the phone or talking together for a *very* long time.

The Challenged Customer

Dealing with a disability is difficult for both the person with the disability and the person who has to adjust their behavior because of it. Whether the problem is physical, mental, or emotional, a disability can often imply some type of communication issue that inhibits your ability to understand the customer's needs. However, as an IT professional, it's your responsibility to overcome that problem and understand what the needs of the individual actually are. The only problem is that doing so can prove to be quite difficult.

Scenario

In the middle of the day a customer walks into your retail store and indicates with her hands that she would like to speak with you. This is odd, because most customers usually indicate to you that they would like to speak by calling out your name or saying "Excuse me." Furthermore, you've been working underneath the counter arranging some of the inventory and you couldn't see the person waving at you, so she must have been waving for at least a few seconds, if not a few minutes. Regardless, you immediately make your way over to the customer and greet her professionally with a polite "Good afternoon, ma'am, how can I help you?"

The customer responds with a polite nod and then begins to wave her hands in odd directions again. At first, you aren't sure what she's indicating, so you interrupt with a brief "Pardon, ma'am? I'm not sure I understand."

Then, as soon as you say that, the customer screams in an almost piercingly loud voice and yells out something absolutely unintelligible. After recoiling from the impact of the sound, you ask the customer to politely repeat her request, and she again screams something that you do not understand.

A bit intimidated, you ask her to repeat herself one more time. Unfortunately, she doesn't respond to this well. She begins to look very upset and starts waving her hands even more frantically, continuing to scream.

Background

It's a bit hard when you don't have a disability to remember that there are literally millions of people in this world who live day to day with a life-altering illness, infirmity, or impairment. However, in the workplace, disability is an important factor to consider when you're providing customer service, because it is your duty to provide service not just to healthy and fully functioning people but to people who are challenged as well.

What this means to you as an IT professional is that you need to be able to easily identify when someone has a disability and you need to know the ways to cope with it—and there are many. Although you may not be intimately familiar with all of them, this scenario will familiarize you with some of the most common ways to communicate to someone who has a disability that presents a barrier to their communication.

Overview

Some of the indications that you can look for to determine whether a customer has a disability are as follows:

Physical Movements Does the person have a limp? Is there some impediment in their motor functions that is recurring?

Visual Comprehension Levels Does the person you're dealing with seem to understand everything you're telling them?

Inanimate Accompaniments Does the person have a hearing aid? A cane? Are they in a wheelchair?

These are just a few of the things you can look for. Table 1.1 in the next section will further illustrate some of the communicative techniques that you can use when you're communicating with individuals who have easily diagnosable problems.

Key Concepts

This is a tough situation. The customer obviously wants something and it is your inability to understand, not her inability to communicate, that is causing the issue. Fortunately, there are some pretty safe procedures that you can use to deal with this sort of scenario.

Step 1: Diagnose the Disability Sensitively

Believe me when I say that this is a very difficult thing to do politically. What you are doing in this first step is trying to discover what the customer's disability is and figure out ways to overcome it in a way that doesn't make the customer feel embarrassed. Here are some of the best ways to determine the nature of a customer's disability:

Body Language

Customers who are deaf or hard of hearing will usually try to make sudden movements to attempt to convey their meaning. Additionally, people who are incapable of speech will generally use more refined movements to indicate what it is that they desire. In this case, a customer is moving her hands rapidly and seemingly randomly, which usually indicates that the customer is hearing-impaired.

Speech Patterns

People who have disabilities tend to speak in different manners. Some people have difficulty enunciating terms or speaking in complex sentences. Sometimes people who are hearing-impaired will speak in unusual tones because they don't know what their voice truly sounds like. Understanding what to look for in these types of disabilities is key to discovering how to communicate.

Step 2: Attempt a New Mode of Communication

This is the easy part. Once you have diagnosed someone's problem, it's fairly easy to find a way to communicate with them. Check out Table 1.1 for a list of good communication recommendations for disabled customers.

TABLE 1.1 Communication Methods for Disabled Customers

Disability	Communication Method
Hearing-impaired	Use illustrations and written communication.
Visually impaired/blind	Use descriptive language and the sense of touch.
Mentally disabled	Be patient and understanding, and try to make things simple to understand.
Physically disabled	Don't ask to assist; just assist with moving and finding things as if it were standard customer service.

Resolution

When dealing with disabled individuals, it's important to remember to be patient and understand that they are not stupid or inept; they are simply disabled. The best thing you can do as an IT professional in a difficult situation like this is to remember that it is your job to communicate. It is your job to make the customer pleased with your service and responsibility.

Watching their body language, understanding their alternative forms of communication, and readily keeping communication tools, such as a pad and paper, at your disposal to help with the occasional situation not only will help you quickly diagnose their problem, but also will quickly impress the person and maybe even impress your superiors.

Skills for the A+ Exam

Here's an example of the type of questions you will see about disabled customers on the A+ exam:

5. A customer who happens to be visually impaired asks you if you can help him identify what is wrong with his laptop computer. Immediately upon inspection of his laptop, you realize that the plastic has been broken on the bottom of the computer and exposed to the elements, ruining the equipment. What is the best procedure?
 - A. Inform the customer of the broken plastic professionally and offer alternatives.
 - B. Attempt to make light of the situation and say that it looks like something accidentally broke the computer.

- C. Speak very slowly to the customer and ask him if he understands.
- D. Apologize repeatedly and say that the problem will never happen again.

Answer A: Correct. This is the absolute best thing you can do. You need to be straightforward, honest, and professional in a situation like this, just as you would be for someone who isn't visually impaired.

Answer B: Incorrect. You should *never* make light of a customer's disability. It is rude and insulting, and will probably result in disciplinary action.

Answer C: Incorrect. The customer is not hearing-impaired, and it isn't a good tactic to use, even if he were.

Answer D: Incorrect. You have nothing to apologize for. You did nothing wrong.

A Quiet Case

There's something that is both really likable and really irritating about people who are very quiet. They're likable, because we don't feel intimidated or judged by them. If you don't say anything, no one really knows what you think. Therefore, we automatically assume that they're probably not thinking anything too negative. Unfortunately, the fact that they don't say much at all has a tendency to make most of us nervous.

In IT, you will run into a lot of cases of quiet people who have technical issues. They present an extremely interesting scenario, because you have to not only be able to diagnose their issue, but also do it with barely any information whatsoever. Let's look at a typical case of a quiet customer and examine some of the tactics you can use to overcome their naturally shy nature.

Scenario

Your company is running a huge promotional sale on computer memory. For the first time ever, system RAM is half price and every DIMM that you sell includes a free 32MB Compact Flash card. It's a heck of a deal, and you've managed to pick up a few DIMMs and cards yourself.

While you're near the front counter, an individual approaches you with a copy of a magazine in hand. Without saying hello, he motions you to look at his magazine, and then indicates a bright red advertisement for your company and for your sale. Afterward, he gestures for you to follow him and leads you toward a specific brand of memory. He points, mumbles something under his breath, and then indicates back toward your memory stick again.

Background

In the real world, most corporations outline a pretty firm policy that they like you to take when it concerns their customers. They believe there is one way that will suit every single customer you will ever have, and it will make everyone match up into a perfect little row that works just the way they want. Unfortunately, the real world doesn't work like that (although it sure would be nice if it did).

22 Chapter 1 • Interacting with Customers

Whenever you're dealing with an "unusual" customer, whether that customer is quiet, quirky, or just strange, you should keep your company's view in mind, but you should also be aware that not everyone fits into a "one size fits all" box. You're going to have to adjust. Now, I'm not saying that you should go in the opposite direction from what your company has been teaching you, but you can do well by keeping your company's viewpoints in mind and following the spirit of them while embracing your own sense of customer service. The A+ exam encourages you to do this by asking a few out-of-the-ordinary questions, and the real world will do the same by presenting situations just like this one.

Overview

This situation is actually inspired by something that happened to me once in the real world. All too often, people will approach you with written material that they think will convey information better than they are able to verbally, and they will place it in front of you as if to say, "Here, read this and understand what I want." Personally, I find it kind of frustrating, but I had to place myself in the shoes of someone in just this sort of situation. Specifically, this person probably:

- Has poor communication skills
- Doesn't like to interact with sales or service people
- Has done a lot of research on the subject
- Would like to see this transaction taken care of as quickly as possible

With these things in mind, you can really put yourself into the mind-set of being a helper. Never forget—understanding your customer is the key to understanding what you have to do to complete a successful transaction. The next section offers some tips on how to do that.

Key Concepts

I don't know about you, but when I think about situations like this (which are all too real), I find it hard not to laugh. I mean, really, I don't think most people act that way. But occasionally, folks just like to act a bit differently than the norm. And, at the end of the day, it takes a lot of different types of people to make the world work. Let's take a look and see if we can figure out the tactics for dealing with someone like this.

Do the Talking for Them

When someone won't talk, do it for them! Talk about the product, talk about the store, talk about anything professional or promotional about your company. The more you say, the more likely that the person will acknowledge what you say or feel compelled to comment, whether that be through verbal or physical language.

In this case, you could say something along the lines of, "Oh, so you're interested in applying our sales toward this particular stick of memory. Is that correct?"

Feel Free to Suggest

Most people who don't talk a lot have a lot to say; they just don't choose or know how to voice it. Instead, you can let people know exactly what you think they are trying to indicate.

- “Are you interested in this promotion?”
- “Are you looking for a replacement DIMM?”
- “Is this what you're looking for?”

This sort of forceful, yet respectful communication engenders trust in people and helps them understand that you're not a stranger; you're someone who is there to help them. People tend to be a lot more communicative with helpers than they are with strangers.

Resolution

OK, now for the good part. How to fix it! The best thing about this type of person is that it's not all that hard to fix. You just have to be a little creative, and a little excited about doing it. Let's go into a little bit more detail on how to do that.

Be Excited!

Don't ever feel afraid to be energetic about your job and your company. When someone seems quiet, docile, or uninterested in your company, it's not going to hurt to be excited about what you do. People *like* enthusiasm. It doesn't matter if it's enthusiasm that is in their field or not; they just like it. But you should always remember that you're a professional, not a cheerleader. Getting a reputation as someone more excited about their company than Steve Ballmer may not be a good idea. Just remember to be open and encouraging, and be the one who takes the first step.

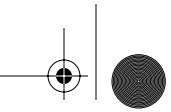
Be Creative

Another thing you shouldn't be afraid to be when dealing with quiet people is creative. While someone quiet may not like to be outspoken or unusual themselves, that doesn't mean they're not going to respond well to someone whom they view as insightful. Keep a good attitude, don't be embarrassed to embrace new ideas, and always be the first one to provide a suggestion.

Skills for the A+ Exam

Here's an example of the type of questions you will see about quiet customers on the A+ exam:

6. What is the *best* solution for dealing with a customer who is not very communicative about her problem?
 - A. Repeat your questions, ensuring she understands.
 - B. Repeatedly ask for clarification of her issues.
 - C. Speak very softly, concentrating on her issue.
 - D. Speak very passionately, concentrating on what you need to understand about her problem.



Answer A: Incorrect. Chances are that she already understands your question; she is just having difficulty getting you to understand her response.

Answer B: Incorrect. It's not a good idea to continuously repeat information until you hear an answer that you either like or understand. You're likely to upset your customer.

Answer C: Incorrect. You should only speak softly in an office environment if someone appears adverse to your loud tone.

Answer D: Correct. Speaking passionately and concentrating on what you need to understand about her problem is a surefire way to get someone to open up.

Easing Tension

You wouldn't believe how stressful computers and technology can be to some people. When you tell them that they have to own, operate, and even maintain a computer, you might as well be telling them that they are going to have to spend their day filing tax returns that are inevitably going to be audited. They're tired, frightened, and more than a little nervous about the machine they're going to get or the problem that they've come across.

Scenario

Halfway through your day, you take the time to assist a customer who has been staring at your new computer systems for over an hour. You introduce yourself, tell him your position, and ask if there is any way that you can help him. After a little visible reticence, the customer informs you that he's looking for a computer that ensures that "No one can spy on him or give viruses."

After explaining to the customer that viruses and spyware are more of a software issue than a hardware one, he tells you that he thinks it just doesn't make sense that there isn't a single computer on the market that can be completely resistant to malware. He then asks you to get your manager or someone who knows more about the subject so that he can consult them.

Background

If you work in any sort of customer service, which, as you can certainly tell by now, we do, you're going to hear the words "I'd like to speak to your manager" a lot. Be prepared for this. It's not anything to be ashamed of. Sometimes people will ask to speak to your manager for the oddest reasons. They may have a complaint. They may think that your service has been so admirable that they'd like to ask if there's a way you could receive a bonus for it. Or they could just be curious about a factor that's totally unrelated to you.

This is worth mentioning because hearing that someone wants to speak to your manager can make you nervous. It immediately brings to mind questions like "Am I in trouble?" or "Did I do something wrong?" But what you should keep in mind is that you shouldn't be afraid. Even if it is the worst possible case, the situation won't be that bad. Chances are that,



even if you get a bad review, your company is not going to fire you or get you in a lot of trouble over a single incident. At the end of the day, things will be what they will be. Now, let's move on to how to deal with easing the obvious tension in this situation.

Overview

What lets us know that there's a problem with this customer's state of mind and situation is that the customer is asking a specific question about security. In general, whenever this topic comes up, it's a good idea to put yourself in the mind-set that you're going to have to ease someone's worry. In fact, there are a lot more dead giveaway subjects that let you know you're going to have to do this. For instance, there are subjects such as:

- Broken hardware
- Malfunctioning software
- Quality problems
- End-user difficulties
- Customer service issues

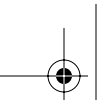
While there are a lot more than these few subjects, these first concepts give you a good idea of just how many problems there are that have to be handled with care. In fact, it's a good idea when you're dealing with a customer to automatically put yourself in the mind-set that you are going to have to ease some tension. People are nervous about a lot of things, and your confident words can go a long way to making them feel better. Be sure to layer your words with kindness and don't spare the simple explanations; they can go a long way. Beyond that, let's take a look at the next section for more questions to ask about a customer's condition.

Key Concepts

The first thing you can tell with someone who behaves in this manner is that something has happened. Regardless of how, when, or why, the person has been led to believe something by someone else. There are a lot of rumors in the IT industry, and there's a lot of confusion. Close to 99 percent of all problems involving anxiety, tension, or fear in the IT industry originate from one thing: ignorance. As IT professionals, we have to discover the source of this ignorance and see what we can do to remedy it.

Why Does the Customer Feel So Nervous/Have This Problem?

People can be told some pretty incredible things. One technique that can help you get to the bottom of whatever it is that they have learned is by simply inquiring about what the customer knows. Has he or she been told something that is complete nonsense? Are they confusing technologies? Is there a way that they may just have been given some inappropriate advice? By asking a simple question, you can understand a lot about the person you're dealing with and what you're going to need to do to help them.



What Is the Customer's Goal?

There has to be some reason the person is anxious enough about whatever their situation is that they've felt motivated to do something about it. Once you understand what that is, you'll be better suited to help him or her out of the bad situation.

Resolution

Once you've clearly defined the the customer's situation, understood their goal, and realized what has caused them so much tension, you're in a good spot. Chances are that once you understand their mind-set you'll be able to help them out. However, there are two tactics that you can put into play: are being confident and being informative.

Be Confident

A good friend of mine once told me that 99 percent of the things that we worry about the most never happen. Some people just need to be told that in a bit more detail. Remember that when you're dealing with someone who is ignorant of a field it's important to be logical and reasonable, as well as to appear to be an authority on the subject. Nothing cures concern quite as much as confidence.

Be Informative

Nothing tops off the concept of being confident like the idea of being confident *and* being informative. If you're just purely confident and don't know what you're talking about, you're going to make someone more nervous. However, if you are confident and you're informed, you're going to be a valuable resource to the person with the problem. Stay calm, keep yourself in the know, and always remember—chances are that you know a lot more about the subject than the person you're dealing with.

Skills for the A+ Exam

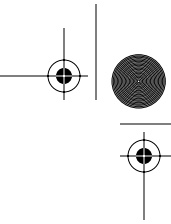
Here's an example of the type of questions you will see about stressed-out customers on the A+ exam:

7. What is the best way to calm an apprehensive customer?
- A. Be as technical as possible.
 - B. Ask for clarification of their issues.
 - C. Speak very slowly, calming them to the best of your ability.
 - D. Speak in a calm tone of voice, appearing concerned about their issue.

Answer A: Incorrect. This is probably just going to make them more nervous. It's best to err on the side of plain speech.

Answer B: Incorrect. If you choose this method, chances are that the customer is going to get frustrated on top of being nervous—not exactly a good combination.





Answer C: Incorrect. If there's one surefire way to make someone even *more* nervous, it's to speak to them like they're a child. In addition to making them feel awkward about an issue, you'll make them feel insulted.

Answer D: Correct. Speaking in a calm tone of voice always goes a long way in communication. However, the key is to appear extremely concerned about their issue. An understanding person is a good person in the eyes of the customer.

Summary

One of the greatest, if not the greatest, concepts in modern economics is the idea of supply and demand. If something is in great supply and low demand, it will economically fail. And vice versa if something is in great demand and low supply, it will succeed. The key is that creating demand in any given market is necessary in order to have a viable business. Part of the process of creating that demand is ensuring that you not only have great products but also excellent service.

Every moment that you neglect a customer, fail to utilize skills that you've been taught, or don't capitalize on the fact that you could enhance the mood and experience of a consumer is a moment that will cost either you or your industry vast amounts of time, money, and effort. Because of this, we as professionals in the IT support industry have to be aware that we must take into account the effect everything we say and do will have on the image of the company we represent. If you're ever having trouble along the way, keep a copy of this book nearby and review some of the encounters we've gone over. If you're still lost, take comfort in the fact that if your mind is in the right place, you're most likely going to succeed. But if you fail, there will always be ways to recover in the eyes of the customer.

