

Forbes

Keys to Managing a Customer Who is Wrong



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by **Chip R. Bell**

The customer is *not* always right. We are all customers, and sometimes we are dead wrong. Stew Leonard, Jr., CEO of Stew Leonard's Grocery Stores, enjoys saying, "The goal is to make the customer *feel* right." His sentiment means never dealing with a customer in a judgmental way because you never want a customer to leave feeling unvalued. But what are ways to let a customer know they are wrong without making them feel wronged? Advice on interpersonal tactics is readily available—listen, let them vent, be empathetic, etc. But what are guiding principles? Here are four.

Always Provide a Path to Doing Right



I made an obvious mistake. In the early morning hours at a Hampton Inn in Lake City, FL, on a long holiday driving trip, I stepped into the breakfast area barefoot. Tammy, the super-friendly associate, warmly presented me with a “you-can-keep-these” pair of slip-on bedroom shoes as I was getting two cups of to-go coffee in the lobby area to take to my guest room. “Could I ask that you please wear these slip-ons while you are in the breakfast area? You can be barefoot in the lobby, but not in the breakfast area.”

Now here is the best part. I indicated that I would not return to the breakfast area if she would kindly get me two blueberry muffins to go. She politely agreed and returned with three muffins already boxed, a serving tray for my muffins, and two cups of coffee. It started my day off to a “can’t-wait-to return” beginning.

Most customers who commit wrongs are not evil or rebellious; they are human. They make mistakes, are absent-minded, and sometimes engage in “see if I can get away with this” actions. They don’t need a parental guardian, but they can sometimes use the mature guidance of someone acting like a caring, older sibling. Avoid insisting they “do right”; instead, provide a path to better choices.

Serve with Generosity, not with Greed

Early morning neighborhood jogs are always made with a smartphone and a money clip containing my driver’s license and a few twenties. On this particular morning I mistakenly left my money clip in my jeans and failed to put move it to my running shorts. As I was on the last leg of my pleasant journey, my wife called and asked me to run by the local grocery store and buy creamer for coffee and a small jar of honey for toast. As soon as the clerk rang up my grocery items, I discovered the absent money clip. My embarrassing error was obvious.



Without hesitation, the clerk said these magic words: “I trust you. Just write your name and the amount on this piece of paper and pay us the next time you are in the store. I will leave the slip in the cash register drawer in case it is a different clerk when

you come back." I paid the bill within the hour! And I cannot envision buying from another grocery store.

Risk is the currency of trust. When organizations take risks on behalf of their customers, it changes the calculus of ardent allegiance. Risk-taking communicates supreme confidence in a brand and its associates as actions are taken outside the protective guardrail of policies and procedures. It is the ultimate faith in humanity to do the right thing.

Focus on Being Effective, Not on Being Right



"The crackers are on sale for a dollar less," she snapped at the Publix grocery store checkout clerk, "it says so on the display." I was the next customer in line, with three others behind me. The clerk reviewed his sales list. "Ma'am, I don't see the crackers on our sale list. Let me run back and check the shelf." Returning, he politely told the customer he could not find a sales sign showing a discount. "Go back and look again," she demanded, "I am sure it was there." The clerk dashed to the cracker shelves again.

"I will gladly pay for her crackers," I told the clerk when he returned, out of breath. She was unmoved. "You are correct, ma'am," he told her, and returned her dollar and change from the register. I doubted his accuracy. She left without a word. He thanked me for my patience. "Matthew, how can someone be so uncaring?" I asked him as he began ringing up my grocery items. He avoided a right vs wrong perspective as he replied, "It was important to her, probably for reasons that had nothing to do with her purchase."

Most of customer service is not a crucible for moral decision-making in which being on the proper side of ethics is vital. Most clashes are a difference of view over matters that are not of grave consequences or bottom-line threatening calls. Insistence on winning an argument can put the customer in the position of fighting for their side of the confrontation. Even if you win, you lose.

Be a Guardian of Your Customer's Dignity

I had a meeting with the General Manager of the Ritz-Carlton Pentagon City hotel. We met in the hotel bar which had a doorway exit directly into the second level of the Fashion Center indoor mall. In the middle of our conversation, the GM suddenly got up from his chair and went straight to a homeless person who had mistakenly wandered into the hotel bar from the connected shopping center. Dressed in dirty, shabby clothes, she was obviously in the wrong place. I half-expected him to ask her to leave. But he did just the opposite.



He asked her to take his arm, and he escorted her to the breathtaking hotel lobby. He showed her the special decorations and elegant décor. Then he escorted her back to the exit door through which she had mistakenly entered and bade her farewell. She was beaming as she left. When he returned to our table, I questioned his actions. "We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen," he told me. "Anyone who enters our hotel, even by mistake, is always to be treated with respect and dignity."

While customers are often mistaken, an effective customer experience is not about proving them wrong but about preserving dignity, trust, and loyalty. By providing a path to doing right, serving with generosity, prioritizing effectiveness over correctness, and safeguarding customer dignity, organizations can turn moments of conflict into lasting allegiance.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2025 ranked him for the eleventh year in a row in the top dozen keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also a senior advisor with On3.ai, a company that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field-based learning programs, as well as an instructor with Fuel, Inc. (myfuel.io). He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.