

Forbes

How to Tame a Customer Militant



By Chip R. Bell

April 15, 2026

Southern politicians often have a homespun way of making a point. A few years ago a candidate for a small-town sheriff's election was overheard saying, "Criticize my drawl, you make me laugh. Criticize my views, you make me listen. But criticize my mama, and you're asking for a fight."

Customer militants come in various forms. Three of the most irritating are the customer crackpots with an ancient ax to grind, the bullies who are only courageous on the unidentified Internet, and the radicals seeking an easy platform for an extreme point of view. When you or your organization are the target of their irreverent, inappropriate, and unfair poison, they can make major mayhem in the manner they shape opinion.

Were this a real neighborhood, their views would be discounted as the “babblings of a fool” and carry zero credibility or influence. However, the anonymity of the Internet removes the capacity for any sort of character check. So their toxic nuttiness can do you damage. Sometimes the better part of valor is to simply ignore their caustic critique as too creepy to comment. But there is a line over which they step when they “criticize your mama” and a smart defense is warranted.

John Kerry lost the 2004 presidential bid against George W. Bush some say because he waited too late to comment on the allegations of a group of highly resourced Swift Boat Veterans for Truth on his Viet Nam war [grandstanding](#). In 1988, candidate Michael Dukakis failed to promptly explain his prison furlough program allowing George H.W. Bush to make hay with [it](#). And Hillary Clinton opted in the 2016 presidential race to ignore the “Pizzagate conspiracy scandal” and the suspicious emails of her campaign chair and it caught fire on social media, damaging her [reputation](#).

Decide where the “criticize your mama” line will be



First decide on the boundary when “criticize your mama” is crossed. But also decide how quickly the “fire alarm” bell will provoke action. What erroneous, ill-founded comments will erode the integrity of your brand? What do you hear standing in the grocery line when others see your nametag? Customers admire service providers who care enough about

their reputation to fight the good fight. You cannot remain silent. But fight fiction with facts; meet hysteria with confidence. The more customers witness your passion rather than your wrath, the more your intervention will be viewed as a mark of marketplace character, not as a defensive gesture trying to duck the spotlight.

Separate “bad faith” from “bad experience”

The true “customer from hell” is a [rarity](#). And they can often be confused with a customer who has “been through hell.” Customers who are angry, disappointed, and frustrated can typically be managed with humility (“I am so sorry”), empathy (“I can understand how that could upset you”), and a demonstrated eagerness to turn disdain into delight. The “customer from hell,” however, is mean with a malicious evil streak. They do not want to just voice anger; they want to punish. They can have incendiary intentions that need to be blocked. Take their vile seriously. Remain calm, stay

emotionally detached, noticeably professional, and protect associates at risk of being harmed. Document the details; you may need them in court.

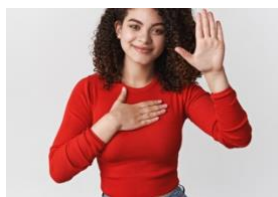
Solicit advocates to join in the fight

Never assume the motive of your opponent. This not a battle of reason. Focus instead on what you stand for and concrete examples of your stance. In today's wired world, delay allows the viral effect to spread like wildfire. One hour in cyber time is the equivalent of one month in snail mail time. Speed of response is your friend in quelling the influence and reach of your adversary.



It may be appropriate to use multiple channels. A major snafu during a February snowstorm that left JetBlue passengers stranded on the tarmac for 14 hours triggered their use of e-mails and letters to key customers, ads in major newspapers, and public appearances by senior [leaders](#). Every public relations channel available was used to quell the sobering effect of a group of “customers from hell” seeking to quickly bring down the airline over a major misstep, despite a history of solid customer relations. Compare that with the recent Delta Air Lines snafu that left Salt Lake passengers delayed for an hour because Delta was waiting on an airline [executive](#).

Acknowledge the truth candidly and quickly.



If some of the claims about Kerry had held a modicum of truth, he could have promptly stated, “I was a 26-year-old cocky lieutenant who wanted my share of the glory. However, there was nothing false about my being in harm’s way in a heavily booby-trapped war zone regardless of the medals it yielded.” He would have likely disarmed his opponents and been able to change the agenda from undeserved heroism in an unpopular war thirty-five years earlier to the issues the Presidential campaign was supposed to be about.

Candor and urgency are valued allies in the war against propaganda. Build a reputation as a truth-teller. Ensure there is always congruence between your stated core values and their marketplace behavior. Monitor your social media. Remain alert for negative reviews since they can be early warnings of minor skirmishes on the verge of become consequential wars.

Customer crackpots, bullies, and radicals are fortunately the exception. But smart organizations find effective ways to keep a short leash on their influence and clout while relentlessly crafting strategies to minimize conditions for their existence.

About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award-winning, international best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2026 ranked him for the twelfth 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 MyFuel.io. He can be reached at www.chipbell.com.