



How not to be an asshole when you talk to customer service

BY HEATHER HUDSON

Eye contact. A friendly smile. “Please,” “Thank you,” and other good manners. It sounds like common sense.

Being a good customer is not rocket science, nor should it be a Herculean effort. But for many of us, it requires [patience and compassion](#) to get through a telephone or retail transaction without blowing our top. Blame it on faulty company policies, rude or untrained customer service representatives, long wait times, or just something in the air—it can be tough to maintain our humanity in banal, but trying, interactions.

Though it may require a shift in perspective, it’s important to remember that we—the customer—often play a starring role in support interactions that leave something to be desired. If we expect the person who helps us to be civil, productive, and even pleasant... then it stands to reason that [we should be, too](#). Here are a few things we can all do as customers to help keep the peace, get what we need, and get outta there pronto.

Keep it simple and clear

Stepping into the Returns line can feel like entering an outer circle of hell.

Bad piped-in music. Grumpy people. Stuffy air that's always uncomfortably warm.

Sadly, it doesn't feel any less irritating to be stuck on hold over the phone at home or the office. Utility companies and banks seem to compete to see who can offer the worst Muzak versions of pop songs—or worse, subject you to non-stop ads.

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Instead of focusing on your own discomfort or annoyance, prepare for the interaction ahead. Before you even get in line or pick up the phone, take a deep breath and think about what you want to accomplish:

- “I'd like to return this top because it's the wrong size.”
- “I need to discuss this charge on my bill. I don't understand it and I want to make sure I'm not overpaying.”
- “This item broke after only one use.”

Start from a place of assuming the customer service rep is good at their job and ready to help. You can help that process unfold by keeping it simple and being clear about your needs.

This should be a no brainer, but... be prepared

Waiting in line can feel interminable, but you can do your part to keep things moving by not being the person who rummages at the bottom of your bag or lazily looks up from your phone when you reach the front. It's not cute to be surprised when you're asked for your account number.

Gather your receipts and other documentation, and make sure you have the right merchandise in the right condition (tags intact or included!) if you're making a return or complaint. Get your credit card ready. And if the interaction is complicated or concerns transactions that happened on multiple dates, make a note of all the information you have.

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Try rehearsing what you're going to say, especially if the problem is complex or technical. And be open to what the customer service representative has to say. Things may not go exactly as you planned, but getting heated will only make an unfortunate situation worse.

Say it with me: Don't shoot the messenger

Whether it's a telemarketer, retail sales clerk, or online customer service representative, you may hear things you don't like about store policies. They may even be unfair, but the situation is not the fault of the front-line customer service agent.

Instead of taking your anger out on the person you're interacting with, channel your frustration into finding a solution. It can be helpful to build consensus by repeating back what you understand to be true. "The store policy is 30 days for returns and 60 days for exchanges. Is that right?" Sometimes you'll get an especially savvy customer service rep who will go to bat with management for a customer who is being especially reasonable.

Even if you wind up with a customer service representative who isn't interested in creative solutions, you can politely ask to speak to a manager. Go through the same process, slowly and with courtesy. Ask them what they would do if they were in your shoes. People are more willing to provide stellar customer service to someone they can relate to.

Let's face it: Sometimes the person we're really mad at is ourselves... for not remembering to pay the bill on time or return the blouse within the stated window. And if the outcome doesn't go your way, remember that you're speaking to someone's friend, sister, uncle or mom. You wouldn't want someone to scream at your mom, would you?

Smile and make eye contact

There's nothing more dehumanizing in a retail setting than having to serve someone who can't even put down their phone to do business with you. As a customer, you might be in a rush to pay and move on with your life, but it's basic common decency to acknowledge the fellow human being who is helping you be on your way.

Instead of taking your anger out on the person you're interacting with, channel your frustration into finding a solution.

That means ending a phone call or pausing a group chat so you can greet the associate warmly. If you're not shy, you could ask them how their day is going. You'd be surprised how little things like this can add up to make or break a person's shift.

And even if you're completing a transaction on the phone, try smiling as you speak. It's one of those things customer service agents do behind the scenes to help set the right tone. It's a best practice that works in both directions.

Offer a compliment

This year, I made a resolution to complete one random act of kindness every day. (Don't ask me how I'm doing with that—it was a long winter in Canada.) One night in February, I was in a Subway restaurant and realized I'd not completed my daily goal yet. While waiting my turn, I noted that the sandwich artist behind the glass was doing a great job at making the subs but also keeping things moving. He was efficient with his movements and meticulous with his topping placement.

When he was counting my change, I said to him quietly, "You're very good at your job." His head whipped up in surprise and an initial look of suspicion quickly dissolved into a grin of delight when he saw that my compliment was genuine. My daughter was equally shocked that I would slip a compliment into an otherwise unremarkable transaction. "I feel like you probably made his night," she observed. I think so too. And it cost me nothing.

Keep calm and...

It's easy to get caught up in a feeling of self-righteousness when you feel that someone has disrespected you or a rule is unfair. [This Bath & Body Works customer's over-the-top reaction](#) to a basic service snafu will make you laugh—unless you work in retail, in which case you'll nod your head knowingly.

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If you find yourself especially worked up about a customer service interaction, take a second to assess your perspective. Would you feel this way if you were in a better mood? If you weren't just cut off in traffic or your kids hadn't been bugging you all day long?

When your rage is triggered, it's easy to lose sight of the big picture. So unless the consequences of a customer service interaction are a matter of life and death, completely losing it on another person, or making your rage very public, is simply not worth it. And if you're in a bad mood to begin with, it's best to avoid interacting with others.

Follow the rules, including the golden one

Want to make a deposit in the retail karma bank? There are a few things you can do (or not do!) to help make the lives of sales or service associates, and your fellow customers, better.

- Stick to the item limit in an express lane.
- Observe store policies. I.e., if you're not sure about a purchase, ask how long you have to make a return before you buy the item.
- Avoid showing up at a store one minute to closing time to "grab a few things".
- Don't put things back where they don't belong. If you don't have time to retrace your steps, you can change your mind at checkout, and let the store associate know so that there's no surprise produce left to rot on the toy shelves at, say, Target.
- Wait your turn to ask for help instead of interrupting a sales associate trying to serve another customer.
- Ask for help finding your size instead of pillaging a table of neatly folded garments.

It's helpful to remember that a customer service interaction is an exchange between two humans, so we each have a say in whether it's unremarkable, upsetting, or pleasant. You can choose your own adventure—just don't be the asshole.