



Diffusing Challenging Customer Situations

From A.C.E. Learning and Performance Solutions

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Whether we are working with internal or external customers, we are working *for* people, and *with* people. As service providers, we are expected to solve customer problems and meet customer needs in a way that reflects positively on our team, our department, and the company.

Customer behaviors come in many varieties, and learning to deal with challenging customer situations is one of the most important things we do.

Customers sometimes try to get their needs met in unproductive ways. For example, they get upset and angry, they become sarcastic, or hostile, or rude, or they whine and they behave in other inappropriate ways.

When this happens, a natural reaction is to feel that we have to defend ourselves. This is called “getting hooked.” Research shows that when we get hooked our brain responds by going into survival mode. Our logical mind shuts down and paralyzes our ability to reason and think straight. As a result, our energy is diverted to “fight or flight response” instead of problem-solving.

Our defensive behavior is perceived as aggression by the customer making the situation worse. Since our goal is to diffuse the situation, not to escalate it, service providers who are able to manage their emotions and behavior can focus on the customer’s needs and create an Astounding Customer Experience (an A.C.E.)

Providing balanced service is another way to create an A.C.E. for the customer. Balanced service means addressing the customer’s personal need as well as the business need.



In a problematic situation, the customer's opening statement, voice tone (and their body language in face-to-face situations), provides us with two important pieces of information: the business reason for the communication (what is happening to the customer on the external level) and how they feel about it (what is happening on the internal level, their emotional state).

Typically, service providers are very effective at dealing with the business side of the issue; fixing the problem. However, they sometimes miss the mark by not attending to the customer's emotional state, the personal need of the customer. Balanced service means solving the business issue effectively and efficiently while providing exceptional customer treatment on the personal level as well.

In sales there is a strategy called finding "the need behind the need." It means looking for the emotional reason a person buys something, because that is the real driver of the purchase or sale.

As service providers, we look for the need behind the need so that we can effectively acknowledge the customer's emotional state and connect with them on a personal level. This is the first step of an A.C.E.

It is critical to respond to the customer's emotional state first. Acknowledge their feelings by listening attentively, expressing empathy and, when appropriate, apologize. For example, if the customer says, "I have had no power for three days and I have two babies," the need behind the need is her ability to provide proper care for her babies. She wants acknowledgement that being without power is very challenging in her particular situation, and she is looking for assurance that it won't be much longer before power is restored.

If the service provider responds by saying, "We're doing the best we can to restore your power," that will only meet the business need of the customer. A customer-focused response that begins with the personal need first would be, "I can imagine that being without power is extremely difficult with two



babies to care for. I assure you that we are doing everything we possibly can to restore your power.” Responding in this manner creates an A.C.E. and builds customer confidence in our company.

After we have met the customer’s personal need and resolved the business part of the interaction, it is important to close on a personal level as well. The manner in which we end the conversation with the customer is very important, because it is the last thing they remember.

What we say depends on the discussion we have had. In the example of the woman and her two babies, we could end the conversation by saying, “We certainly don’t want your family to be uncomfortable. Please know that our crews are working as fast as possible to get your power back on. Take care, now.”

The three steps for providing balanced service and creating an A.C.E. are Connect, Correct, and Close:

- 1) **Connect** - begin the conversation by addressing the personal need,
- 2) **Correct** – solve the business reason for the interaction, and
- 3) **Close** the conversation on the personal level to fulfill the personal need one last time.

When we manage challenging situations productively, the customer feels that we really care about them. They have more confidence in our company, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that we made a difference.

Our goal is to create A.C.E.s—Astounding Customer Experiences. How many A.C.E.s will you create today?

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About Elys Brewda:

Elys Brewda provides consulting and training for companies seeking to improve the quality of life for their workforce and their customers. As a result of her influence, people become highly skilled at relationship-building with internal and external customers.

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