Good customer relations are an indispensable part of any successful organization since its life is dependent on maintaining satisfied customers. Customer satisfaction, in turn, cannot be maintained without the skillful handling of customer complaints. The proper handling of customer complaints can keep a customer from going to a competitor and in many cases can lead to additional business. While there is by no means total agreement on what constitutes an effective way to handle these complaints, expressing empathy appears to be an important element of the complaint handling procedure. Indeed, in a number of commercially available programs (e.g., American Management Associations’ Principles of Professional Salesmanship, Development Dimension’s Interaction Management, Scientific Method’s Sales Grid) the salesperson’s ability to listen empathetically to the customer’s complaint is deemed an important element of the complaint handling process and, in turn, the entire sales process. King and Levine\(^1\) acknowledge the importance of empathy and go on to assert that women are better salespersons than men largely because they are more skilled in empathizing and listening than men.

But what exactly is empathy, and how can a salesperson learn to use this important skill? In the sales context, Mayer and Greenberg\(^2\) in their classic Harvard Business Review article define empathy as:

\[ \ldots \text{the important central ability to feel as the other fellow does in order to be able to sell him a product or service}\ldots \]

Another definition of empathy is provided by Clark,\(^3\) who defines empathy as:

\[ \ldots \text{the capacity of an individual to feel the needs, the aspirations, the frustrations, the joy, the sorrows, the anxieties, the hurt, indeed, the hunger of others as if they were his or her own...} \]

Empathy, then, is at the other extreme of insensitivity. It is a word which we use when one person is hearing and understanding another. In the past, the Indians used to talk of “walking in another’s moccasins,” while in today’s world it means standing on the other side of a person’s desk to see the situation from his or her side. The salesperson must see the world through the other individual’s eyes.

In effect, the salesperson who responds empathetically merges temporarily with the customer. He or she merges with the other so that both may explore the other’s experience. The objective of this process is to allow the salesperson to identify and eventually to fulfill customer needs—and identifying customer needs is essential to a successful sales effort.

The skill of responding empathetically involves the salesper-
Responding empathetically allows the salesperson to identify and eventually to fulfill customer needs—and identifying customer needs is essential to a successful sales effort.

expressions. Become an interpreter of body language. Learn to identify when a customer is listening and not listening.

Carefully analyze the customer’s words. Listen and summarize what is indicative of his or her feelings. To assist the salesperson in understanding the customer, he or she can start by asking themselves: “If I were the customer and I were doing and saying these things, how would I feel?” In answering this, the salesperson can first identify the general feeling category (happy, angry, frustrated, pleased, confused) and the intensity of that feeling (high, medium or low).

The salesperson then selects a feeling and a phrase that fits the feeling category and level of intensity. Finally, the salesperson communicates to the customer his or her understanding of the customer’s feelings. As in empathetic responding to content, the salesperson should not parrot back the feeling the customer may have verbally expressed, but should come up with an expression or response that conveys to the customer his or her understanding and sensitivity to the customer’s emotions. This will let the customer know that the salesperson understands his or her emotions.

In expressing empathy, the salesperson should remember that feelings stem from content. Therefore, if the salesperson understands the content of the problem, he or she can better understand the customer’s feelings and is thereby better able to respond to those feelings. For example, look at the several feeling states and the related content areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEELING</th>
<th>CONTENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HAPPY</td>
<td>About purchasing something you wanted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANGRY</td>
<td>Because the product doesn’t work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFUSED</td>
<td>When you can’t figure out why the product won’t work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROUD</td>
<td>Because you purchased the best product.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are many ways of expressing empathy; the following types of formats will be helpful to the salesperson in expressing empathy to the customer. Read the responses below and pick out two or three that you as a salesperson feel most comfortable with. Practice using them so that responding empathetically will not appear mechanical.

- You feel (feeling) because (content).
- When (content) it made you feel (feeling).
- It’s really a (feeling) when (content).
- I can see how (feeling) you feel. Tell me more about the (content).
- I understand you feel (feeling). Do you see why we have to (content)?
- It seems that (content) made you feel (feeling). Why is that?
- You must have felt (feeling).
when (content).
  - (Content) must make you feel (feeling).
  - Because (content), you feel (feeling).
  - As you see it, (content), and that makes you feel (feeling). Go on, tell me more.
  - I would feel (feeling) myself with (content) yet the facts are...
  - What it comes down to is that because of (content) you feel (feeling). Let's see what we can do about this.
  - You feel (feeling) because you cannot (content).

Now that you have familiarized yourself with various ways to express empathy, complete the following exercise. For each of

the items below, indicate whether or not the salesman's response to the customer's statement is empathetic. If you feel the salesman's response is empathetic, place an "x" in the space provided for that item; if you feel the salesman's response is not empathetic, place an "x" in the space provided and write a more appropriate response in the spaces provided.

1. Customer: That display you set up for me has got to be the most inept sales promotion I've ever seen.
   Salesperson: It's a standard display that we use in all our promotions. What do you want me to do about it?
   Empathetic __ Not Empathetic __

2. Customer: We had to shut down the equipment yesterday for two hours because your people were late with the parts. You really hurt our production.
   Salesperson: I'm sorry but this time of year is our busy season. I assure you we'll do better next time.
   Empathetic __ Not Empathetic __

3. Customer: Your people made a mistake on the last invoice you wrote and now you made another one, this time for $2500. Why can't you folks ever get things straight?
   Salesperson: It's frustrating when you receive invoices that are incorrect. Let's see what we can do about the problem.
   Empathetic __ Not Empathetic __

4. Customer: Why is it I always get a low service priority from you? I don't think it's fair for you to make me wait while you service another account.
   Salesperson: It's our policy to service our accounts in the order in which they are received.
   Empathetic __ Not Empathetic __

5. Customer: The quality of the products you've been sending us has dropped considerably over the last several months, and this last shipment just proves my point.
   Salesperson: It makes me angry to receive products from us that are not up to your standards. It makes me angry, too. Tell me more about it.
   Empathetic __ Not Empathetic __

6. Customer: I hear you will be raising prices on us again. This is the third price increase this year. I won't pay any more.
   Salesperson: I feel upset myself with continually increasing prices. Yet the facts are that with the inflation rate today we are forced to adjust our prices...
quicker than any of us previously thought.
Empathetic __________ Not Empathetic __________

7. Customer: I told you I wanted two copies of the invoice—both originals. I didn’t get them and I’m beginning to wonder whether you want my business or not.
Salesperson: I understand your being annoyed when we didn’t send you two originals of the invoice. Let’s see what we can do about the problem.
Empathetic __________ Not Empathetic __________

8. Customer: You sent us the wrong parts again. We ordered size A and you sent us size C. Can’t you ever get your people to send the right things?
Salesperson: I’m sorry that happened. I assure you it won’t happen again.
Empathetic __________ Not Empathetic __________

9. Customer: I’m going to go to a competitor, Pat. They really seem to care about the follow-up service they give, while you just take us for granted.
Salesperson: As you see it, we’re not concerned about keeping you as a customer, and that makes you feel angry. Go on, tell me more.
Empathetic __________ Not Empathetic __________

10. Customer: The last job you did for us was poorly handled. You’ve got to have the most inexperienced people in the industry.
Salesperson: I’m sorry about the last job but it seems we’re just having a hard time getting qualified people. Our new employees are just not made of the stuff you and I are made of.
Empathetic __________ Not Empathetic __________

If you indicated that items 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9 were empathetic, you are correct and should give yourself two points for each correct item. Items 1, 2, 4, 8 and 10 were not empathetic and you should give yourself one point only if you acknowledged the content of his or her complaint. You should give yourself 0 points if you responded by saying such things as, “That’s too bad,” “I’m sorry to hear that,” “Things like that just seem to happen,” “What do you want me to do about it?”

Responses such as “That’s too bad,” “I’m sorry to hear that,” and “Things like that just seem to happen” do not express empathy and typically upset the customer even more.

and “They just don’t make ’em like they used to.” Such responses do not express empathy and typically upset the customer even more.

For each of the salesperson’s statements that were not empathetic, you should have written a response that would let the customer know that you are aware of his or her feelings. The following responses are examples of what a salesperson could have used to express empathy for the customer in the above items.

Grade your responses using these items as a model, but realize that any number of other responses that acknowledge what the customer said and how he or she feels could have been used.

Item 1. Customer: That display you set up for me has to be the most inept sales promotion I’ve ever seen.
Salesperson: It seems that the display I put together for you has really upset you. What can we do to rectify this?

Item 2. Customer: We had to shut down the equipment yesterday for two hours because your people were late with the parts. You really hurt our production.
Salesperson: I apologize for our late delivery; you must have felt very irritated when we didn’t show up with parts when I told you I’d be there. Where do we go from here?

Item 4. Customer: Why is it that I always get a low service priority from you? I don’t think it’s fair for you to make me wait while you service another account.
Salesperson: You feel that maybe we don’t appreciate your business because we were not able to service you immediately, but I can assure you that we do value your orders.

Item 8. Customer: You sent us the wrong parts again. We ordered size A and you sent us size C. Can’t you ever get your people to send the right things?
Salesperson: I can see how that could get your day started off on the wrong foot. Tell me about the incorrect order you received.

Item 10. Customer: The last job you did for us was poorly handled. You’ve got to have the most inexperienced people in the industry.
Salesperson: It upsets me whenever one of my accounts is unhappy with our work. Can you give me some more details?

If you scored between 16-20 then you could rate yourself high in empathetic responding. A score of 8-15 would be indicative of a moderate degree of empathy. Individuals in this range should pick out a couple of the empathetic formats listed earlier and become familiar with their use. People who score 7 or less
What’s wrong with this sentence: “After eating lunch, the plane took off for Pittsburgh.”
(See answer* below.)

“Executive Guide to Grammar” is Albert Joseph’s first new major work since “Put It in Writing” 10 years ago. You’ll find he has lost none of his touch; that uncanny ability to make the English language easy and understandable is still there. Like its predecessor, “Executive Guide to Grammar” is non-academic yet dignified. Unlike “Put It in Writing,” however, this is a self-study program. In fact, every person who has taken “Put It in Writing” should keep a copy of this book at his or her desk. It is the perfect companion piece.

Its subtitle tells you much about the treatment of a subject that is usually dull: “Nobody needs to know what a gerund is except people taking a test that asks, ‘What’s a gerund?’” Joseph concentrates on the things every writer needs to know. How do you tell when to use a comma? Which is correct, “between he and I” or “between him and me”? Do periods go inside or outside quotation marks?

Joseph doesn’t just answer these questions, however. “Executive Guide to Grammar” pleasantly and methodically builds a solid foundation in traditional grammar—clauses, phrases, subject-verb agreement, and other essentials—so the busy writer can answer his or her own questions. Lessons are reinforced by self-study exercises and answer keys which (unlike so many other programs) explain the reasons behind the answers. This is adult education at its best.

When you consider that one blooper (like the dangling participle* above) can cost your company a major contract, or destroy your image, shouldn’t you recommend “Executive Guide to Grammar” for every letter or report writer in your company?

References
