

Subject / Handling Difficult Clients

As most photographers know, pressing the shutter is only the smallest part of making a successful portrait sale. No matter how skilled a technician or how creative an artist you might be, you and your staff still must deal with customer service issues that flow from the sales process. An important part of any customer service program is developing intelligent strategies to use when you encounter the occasional difficult customer. If you are prepared for these types of clients, you can turn most of them into your most ardent supporters—when you handle their complaints properly. Here are some suggestions on how to do just that.

- > Keep your cool. The first step in gaining the upper hand when confronted by an unhappy client is to keep yourself under control. Complaints aren't any fun to hear, and often the complainer's attitude or behavior is unpleasant or challenging. He or she has come to "push" on you. Remember that if you push back, the unhappy client will just push harder. So above all, keep your cool.
- > Empathize with your client. Let the client know how concerned you are. Explain that you know how it feels to be dissatisfied, and you don't want any of your valued customers to feel that way about your business. Assure the client that you will do your utmost to rectify the problem.
- > Assess the problem. Are you responsible for the problem, or is the client making an unreasonable demand? The answer will dictate how to proceed.

What to do if you created the problem:

- > Acknowledge the error. Nothing calms an irate client faster than admitting your mistake. Most people expect resistance when they make a complaint, so they arrive ready to explode. Remove the resistance and there is no need for an explosion.
- > Suggest a remedy. Before you can do this, make sure you understand how your error has affected the client. Then, suggest an appropriate way to rectify the problem(s) that your error has created.
- > Get the client to agree that the remedy is satisfactory. This agreement will help to eliminate further problems—such as promising to remake a portrait on a rush basis, only to have the client demand a discount later on because the work was late in the first place.
- > Make sure the correction is achieved. Nothing is more infuriating to a client than to be promised that a problem will be corrected, and then have that promise unfulfilled. Most people are reasonable when a first mistake is made, but they deserve to be righteously indignant the second time around.

- > Provide the client with more than they expect. Give the client something extra—a frame for a gift print, extra wallets, or an additional print. Perform an unexpected service such as personally delivering the finished order, or anything that will pleasantly surprise the person. Chances are, this small act of kindness and concern will more than make up for any problems you have created. In the rare instance that your mistake has created a severe problem, consider sending flowers with a note of apology. Such unexpected thoughtfulness can tame even the most hostile individual.
- > Follow-up. Several weeks after the problem was resolved, call or write the client. Let him or her know you hope the order is satisfactory, and express regrets that a problem existed in the first place. Again, this is a totally unexpected gesture, and most people will react favorably to it.

What to do if the client is being unreasonable:

- > Look for “unspoken” issues. The client’s complaint may have nothing whatsoever to do with the quality of your product or service. “I’m not happy with the picture,” when you think it’s just great, could mean anything: the client is having financial problems, he doesn’t understand why you vignettted the corners, or she didn’t like her hairdo and was afraid to say so when she viewed the previews. In an extreme case, perhaps there’s an underlying personal situation—such as illness—that’s affecting the customer’s behavior.
- > Ask gentle questions to reveal hidden issues. “Are you happy with your hairdo in the portrait?” or “Do you like the outfit your daughter is wearing?” Sometimes, however, you need to be more direct. If you suspect there is a financial problem, you may have to ask, “Are you concerned about the price?” If money is the issue, the client might admit it, and you can suggest that the balance of the account be paid in installments. If finances aren’t the problem, most people will tell you what’s on their mind because they don’t want you to think they can’t afford to pay.
- > With most unspoken issues, you are dealing with clients who themselves are dealing with something troubling. When you approach their situation from a sympathetic, problem-solving perspective, you eliminate a confrontational atmosphere and stand a good chance of providing a solution that will earn the client’s gratitude.
- > Have the client suggest a remedy. “What can I do to please you?” is an appropriate question to ask a client who appears to be unreasonable. The answer will help you to respond appropriately. If the remedy makes sense, agree to it, then follow through in the same manner that you would if you had been directly responsible for the problem. Remember, you may not agree that you created a problem, but when the client is not pleased, the effect is the same from his or her perspective. So do whatever you can—within reason—to please that client.
- > Always maintain the integrity of your business. All businesses encounter unreasonable clients. Some are just out to get something for nothing, and others are simply miserable people. From a management perspective, your responsibility in dealing with such people is to

maintain the integrity of your business.

For example, when a client claims he is unhappy with your photography, but will be satisfied if you deduct a percentage off his bill, then you know he just wants something for nothing. Were you to give in to this demand, you would break faith with those clients who pay in full. The best thing to do in such a case is to tell the client—very politely and sincerely—that you have a money-back guarantee on your work, and the last thing you want is for him to leave your studio with work that he's not happy with. Therefore, you are prepared to refund his money. Now you have called the client's bluff: either he pays in full, acknowledging that the work is satisfactory, or his money is refunded and the portraits that he no doubt wants are no longer available to him.

- > When you do encounter the type of client who simply is a miserable human being, the oh-so-polite money-back move also is the best way to proceed. Yes, you may take a loss on that single transaction, but it is better than subjecting yourself and your staff to further abuse, and you can be secure in the knowledge that you have taken the high road with this unpleasant person.

Logistical Considerations

When a client comes to your studio with a complaint, take him or her to an area where you can discuss the matter privately. Don't let the discussion take place where other customers can hear what's going on. After you're in a private area, offer to get the client a cup of coffee and be as hospitable as possible. It's hard for most people to maintain their anger when they are being treated so cordially.

When you encounter an angry telephone caller, let the caller vent her displeasure. Then tell her you'll call back as soon as you research the situation. This will give you time to collect your thoughts. Then when you make the return call, you will have the tactical advantage of intruding on her at a time when she probably has her mind on other issues.

By approaching unhappy clients from a dispassionate and problem-solving perspective such as those outlined above, you will improve your ability to deal with one of the most troublesome aspects of studio management.