

LESSONS LEARNED | BY GERSON ROSENBLUM

# Keeping Clients Happy

**B**ack in the 1980s, the second-largest U.S. toy store had the slogan, “Let Lionel Kiddie City turn that frown upside down.” I loved that slogan. Sadly, it was only the products they sold that truly delivered on that promise. The store experience typically left people grumpier than when they arrived. Of course, Lionel Kiddie City is no longer with us.

No matter what, certain situations arise that cause customers to frown. Defective products, unavoidable delays and inadvertent mistakes all cause customers to come to us with their proverbial pistols drawn. How we address these situations often defines how we’re perceived. You can provide extraordinary service almost all the time, and you can be a pillar of the community nearly always. But it’s your grace under fire that will rate highest when customers draw up the report card.

So how do you deal with angry customers? Do you hide yourself away and let someone else deal with them? Do you try to invalidate the customer’s claim? Do you blame someone else? Do you make up excuses to explain away a mistake and try to save face? A lesson learned very early in my career was that doing any of the above only serves to agitate an already-edgy customer and makes a bad situation worse. The only right solution is to take complete ownership of the problem and use it to provide customer service that’s unreasonably good.

## EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

**H**ere’s an example from the days when my company imported guitars directly from Japan. We received one shipment that included a few hundred classical guitars. Back in those pre-Ibanez days, a large percentage of those instruments got sold in our retail store. This particular batch had a problem with the nylon

rollers on the machine heads. Perhaps 10 percent of the rollers would suddenly crack. The scenario was often the same: A customer would come in angry because he opened the case to find a cracked roller on his guitar. He was fully prepared for a runaround, a delay or an excuse. What he got instead was something that won us many long-term customers.

We took this defective-part problem and turned it into an

opportunity to win customer support. While the customer waited, we removed the strings and machine heads, replaced all six rollers (even though only one was broken typically), oiled the fingerboard, restrung the guitar and polished it prettier than ever. Was it overkill? Perhaps. But we took customers who fully expected to be disappointed and exceeded their expectations. Quite literally, we turned their frowns upside down. In return, many of these customers still bought from us decades later — bringing the kids and sometimes even the grandkids in for their first guitars. And the cost to us was negligible compared to the benefits.

By contrast, I received an e-mail while I was writing this column from a company that puts on a special event. It was informing customers that one of the acts had cancelled. It didn’t have a replacement act or a make-good. No, the company was suggesting that we write to the act to complain. What?

Fixing problems isn’t always economical when taken at face value. But your primary focus should be on the long-term good that comes from doing the right thing. If you’re in the business of making customers smile, do you really have another option? **MI**

Gerson Rosenbloom is managing director of Wechter Guitars. He’s former president of Medley Music and a past NAMM chairman. E-mail him at [gersonmusicinc@gmail.com](mailto:gersonmusicinc@gmail.com).



**The way we address difficult situations often defines how we’re perceived by customers**