

# IDEAS



>>> **Inside IDEAS**

> Customer Whisperer Page 36

> Lessons Learned Page 40

> Customer Care Page 42

> Lesson Room Page 44

> Streetwise Page 46

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

## HOW TO TAKE THE HEAT

remember being a young lad in Sunday school and learning the importance of the commandment “Thou shall not lie.” Even at that age we struggle with how much to disclose. Aunt Edna asks if you think her dress is pretty, and you don’t like it. What’s the appropriate response? Is hurting her feelings integral to telling the truth?

I grapple with similar dilemmas 40 years later. If you plan on firing an employee at the end of business, is it a lie to pretend everything’s OK until 5 p.m. when you call him into your office? Is it necessary to disclose to a customer that your purchasing agent failed to place his special order? Is it a fib to not reveal that an unboxed keyboard was returned after two weeks in another customer’s home, even though it was never played?

How do you deal with a customer calling you or your business to the carpet? What do you do when customers have a legitimate complaint? No matter what level of exposure you choose to risk, there are some healthy guidelines you and your staff should keep in mind when dealing with



**‘A customer sharing criticism with you is giving you a gift.’**

negative feedback and playing the customer blame game.

Rule No. 1: Discretion is the better part of valor. In most cases, the less you say, the better. Too often, our inclination to rationalize goes too far when explaining personal faults. Many times, friends don’t need us to dwell on our faults, and neither do cus-

tomers. Own the mistake, but never admit more than you have to.

Watch emotional, overly casual wording. “We made an error” is far more tactful than “We screwed up royally.” This is especially significant when it’s another employee’s fault. You don’t want to throw him or her under the bus with inappropriately colorful language. “Our clerk is an idiot” doesn’t give the offended customer confidence in the employee or the employer. (Who hired her, anyway?)

Think of the recent British Petroleum “top kill.” What an embarrassing choice of words for the solution to an environmental disaster. The name not only sounded haphazard but it highlighted the destructive consequences to marine life. Couldn’t BP have come up with a more constructive label for its plan of attack to correct this unpardonable transgression? It had Madison Avenue at its disposal, right?

Don’t insult the customer (obviously), but don’t unnecessarily insult yourself or your business either. You can accept blame without confessing incompetence. “We blew it, but

we are better than this, and we expect ourselves to behave to a higher standard.”

Use verb tense constructively. “We are going to improve ourselves” is more positive than “We won’t do that again,” as the former implies forward motion. A customer sharing criticism with you is giving you a gift. The best thing you can do in any confrontation, first and foremost, is thank a customer for taking the time to offer suggestions to make your business better. Even if the customer’s just griping, your “thank you” makes him feel important, *and* you’re giving cordial validation to a concern, even if you don’t privately agree with the implied degree of imprudence.

New employees need a laundry list of taboos. In our company, discussing compensation is grounds for dismissal. We are also strong on customer privacy, especially addresses and credit information. Make sure these are understood upfront, and you won’t pay the price later. **MI**

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