

Questions that can help

You're dealing with an angry customer. It's stressful but you have managed to stay calm and show empathy. Now you need to explore the customer's problem.

Use a gentle questioning approach try to understand the root of the customer's problem. Keep the questions open and neutral. Remember the five causes of anger (iSAP) and use your questioning to identify which route to follow.

Useful questions include:

- "I can see that you are upset, and I want to help. Will you explain your concern to me please?". You start the discussion by acknowledging that the customer is angry and that you want to help resolve the situation. To do that they need to explain their side of the story in some detail. Getting them to describe the problem will also, usually, help their anger cool off a little.
- "Can I get you some water?" Dehydration can intensify agitation, so it is worth offering water. It also, literally, helps them to cool off a little.
- "Would you explain the reasons for your anger please?" This is another question used to try and get the customer to describe their problem to you rationally. Once we manage to get the customer to think about their problem rationally rather than emotionally, we start to deescalate the situation.
- "How would you like the situation to be resolved?" You put the ball in the customer's court by asking them how they would like things to be different. You may not be able to agree to all of their proposed solution, but you should try to meet them part way, and the customer feels they are being dealt with on their terms.
- "What do you need to achieve to help us move forward?" Again we are trying to understand the customer's point of view and what they feel they need at this point.
- "What can I do to help us get through this issue?". This question is like the last in that we want to understand how the customer would like their problem resolved. This form of the question shows that you are taking some responsibility and want to help resolve the situation.
- "How can we work together to get through this issue?". With this question we are trying to build a bond with the customer – that you want to work with them to achieve a satisfactory solution. Once they become open to the possibility of working with you, they cease to be against you as forcefully.
- "What else do you think I should know?". This is a very open question. The customer can read whatever they want into it. If there are personal worries or stresses behind their anger it gives them the opportunity to mention them. If they do, you might be able to advise them where to get help.
- "What happens if other things are not to your liking?" This is the sort of question you might deploy as you begin to bring the customer's anger down and are

working towards a resolution. You don't want the situation to be repeated in future so it can be useful to agree a mechanism to address any future problems.

- “Are we agreed on this point?”. Once we start to understand the customer's problem we can build rapport with them by reflecting our understanding of the situation back to them – as we saw in the 12 steps. You are moving from confrontation to collaboration and the anger will reduce as you do.
- “If we agree to do this, will you agree to that?”. This question also helps build collaboration by ensuring that both parties agree responsibility to resolve the issue. It may be partly, or largely, your organisation's fault but you can bring the customer back onboard by helping them realise that they have responsibilities too.
- “I understand that you are angry, but you know you can't do that don't you?”. If the customer's anger is leading them to be abusive or threatening, then you need to set boundaries. You want them to realise that you will help but can only do so if the customer behaves appropriately and doesn't cross the boundaries set out in the customer behaviour policy. For example, politely ask the customer not to use bad language and to sit down and discuss the problem with you. This is a narrow path to cross and the important thing is to remain calm but to be firm. If the customer continues down the path of abuse and threats then you probably need to summon help from a manager or even security or the police.

Using questions rather than statements in your interaction with the angry customer, keeps the attention on them and helps them understand that you are serious about resolving their problem.

Example Scripts for Angry Customers

It's impossible to cover every scenario or every industry sector. Here are some sample opening phrases you can use to try and build some sort of rapport with an angry customer.

"Mr Bloggs, I can see you're upset and I'll do my best to help. I am sorry you have had to wait. We had an equipment failure earlier and that held up all the appointments. Tell me about what's upsetting you"

"I'm really sorry to see you're upset, I'd like to help. Let's go into this room to discuss it".

"What's causing the problem? Are you worried that we'll meet the deadline? Let me assure you that we will"

"I can see you're upset. Can I take you through to this meeting room there where we can talk in private? Can I get you a drink of water?"

Take customer into a private room and sit them down. Sit next to them

"Tell me about what's upsetting you Mr Bloggs?"

"What can I do to help?"

"I understand that you are frustrated. I'm sorry we're running late because [*explain*]. I can get your case manager to call you between X time and Y time if you don't want to wait any longer" *Make sure the manager does call back!*

"You have a right to be angry Mr Bloggs, and I apologise if it is anything we have done that's made it worse. I want to help you. Talk me through what's wrong".

"I can see that you are angry Mr Bloggs. I'm sorry. Tell me what the problem is and I'll do my best to find a solution. Tell me about what's upsetting you".

"I agree its frustrating Mr Bloggs. How would you like to see the situation resolved?"

“Mr Bloggs, I am really sorry this has happened. Things don’t usually go wrong like this. Let’s sit down and plan a way to work together to get back on track”.

“I can see you’re upset Mr Bloggs and you have a perfect right to be. Come into the office and explain the situation to me in detail. I’ll make sure we get it sorted. And let me give you my contact details so we can get any further problems resolved quickly. Agreed? Now, what else do you think I should know?”.

“I am afraid we can’t let you ahead of other customers waiting [*or other request you cannot agree to*], as a compromise how about we book you in for the first appointment next week? [*or other counter offer*]”

I am sure you begin to see the pattern from these sample opening phrases. You are opening the discussion by acknowledging the customer’s upset, apologising for your organisation’s part in it, and trying to explore the customer’s issue in detail. This will help build rapport with the customer and, in most cases, should take much of the heat out of their anger. You then need to move on to agree a plan with the customer to resolve their problem.