

Worst excuses for service failure – the case of the hospitality industry

Customer complaints are a gift. Service operators should be thankful that their customers have given up their time to make them understand their dissatisfactions. However, some service operators may be offended by the complaints and attempt to respond with “good” excuses rather than try to resolve the issues. A study of more than a hundred customer complaints and operators’ replies from Google review, Facebook Business Review, TripAdvisor and Booking.com, focusing mainly on hospitality-related services (restaurants and hotels), was conducted and below are five of the worst excuses for poor service and the verbatim response of service operators.

Worst excuse No 1: In accordance to policies

What does a staff do when guests request for extra bath towels during full occupancy at a hotel? There are two general excuses to say no: 1) tell the guests the truth that you are running out of linen due to the high occupancy rate, or 2) explain that it is the company’s policy for each room to be given a specific number of towels and additional requests are not allowed. Many of us can easily guess that the first option is more acceptable while the second would trigger a series of unpleasant verbal exchanges.

“We are sorry that your request wasn’t accommodated by our housekeeping staff. Your experience with our hotel services is very important to us, as much as we would like to accommodate every guest’s request, but we would like to let you know that there is a policy that we strongly adhere, thanks for your understanding.”

Worst excuse No 2: New staff

Staffing hotels and restaurants has always been tough. To make matters worse, the turnover rate in these industries is one of the highest in the service sector. Hence, new recruits and casual workers are generally higher in ratio than full-timers. A proper employee orientation programme is the ideal fix for such a problem, but this approach is costly and time-consuming. Consequently, many staff and



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work orientation programmes have either been shortened or even eliminated, with organisations fully reliant on on-the-job training.

“Thanks for your feedback! After we have investigated on the matters that you have brought up to us few days ago, we discovered that the person who checked you in over the reception counter is our new employee who just joined us a week ago. She is not well-aware of our check-in procedure. Sorry of the inconvenience caused and hope to welcome you again.”

Worst excuse No 3: Not within one’s jurisdiction

Employee empowerment is perhaps more effective than setting strict standards for staff to follow. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Group has been consistently named one of the world’s best five-star hotels and this is not due to its comprehensive service details alone but by the addition of staff empowerment. For many years, The Ritz-Carlton has given its staff US\$2,000 to be used to solve any customer complaint in the manner that they see fit. It works because it changes how its employees view its customers, and how its customers view its employees. When employees have increased flexibility and a generous disposition, customers naturally feel inclined to be reasonable in return. However, if employees start off by being defensive and rigid, customers would tend to respond by escalating their demands.

“Dear valued customer, we are deeply sorry for the bad experience that you had with our restaurant. Sorry that our staff did not refund or given you a discount due to our kitchen mistake. This was because the supervisor on duty wasn’t around that time to address your complaint. Please give us another chance to serve you better.”

Worst excuse No 4: ‘Standard’ waiting time

“Well, it’s within our standard delivery time of 10 working days!” What does this even mean? Will the customers’ orders be delivered in two days, seven days or 10 days? If the product does not reach the customer in 10 days, can the customer claim a refund? Many companies intentionally lengthen

their promised delivery time to ease their busy operations or mitigate uncertainties. If guests are left unattended because of the standard speed of work, then I think it is fair that the guests pay a standard price, depending on how they feel about the service.

“Madam, according to our system, your order is still pending for delivery. For your information, our standard processing time is about 10 working days excluding weekend and public holidays. The earliest of your delivery could be 3 days or latest by the 10th day. Thank you!”

Worst excuse No 5: Spiteful responses

The worst of the worst replies are those that fight back against the complaints. There is a clear difference between a reasonable defence of what is not entirely your fault and fighting back with the intention to humiliate and disrespect the customers. There is no doubt that any vengeful response would only increase the severity of the complaints and the next day, it could become a social media sensation.

“We forgive you if you are ignorant. No Chinese restaurant serve pepper. What is usually available is soya sauce and vinegar. We could be a joke if we are western restaurant but no pepper in house. Again, shark fin is definitely tasteless. Are you expecting to get shark fin smell instead of the other smell? Otherwise you would need more than pepper.”

In summary, an apology is better than an excuse. Operational constraints such as a shortage of resources and lack of uniformity are no longer considered reasonable excuses for today’s consumer market. Though no one likes to be criticised, customer complaints offer an opportunity to recognise and effectively rectify the root cause of any service failure. One key aspect of handling complaints is timely decision and action. Provide your employees with the skills and confidence to tackle difficult customers and support them in their actions. Excellent complaint handling is not easy; it can be stressful and feel unrewarding. However, success in the handling of complaints is the fundamental building block of great customer service. E