

Defusing an Argument

Brought to you by Assemble You.

It's time to work on YOU. So sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

How often have you experienced a heated situation at work? When you sit back and think about it, you might only remember snippets of conversations, angry facial expressions, and sharp changes in tone. But the stress stays with you for much longer, and it can have a massive impact on your overall health.

In an interesting 2020 study, [79 per cent of respondents said they frequently felt stress at work](#). An [infographic](#) from Healthline shows how stress has an impact on every area of your body. People who experience consistently high levels of stress have tense muscles, stomachaches, high blood pressure, and an increased risk of heart attacks, among other things.

It's no secret that service-industry jobs can be full of uncomfortable encounters. People who work in hospitality, tourism, and retail jobs are likely to experience stress as a result of disagreements with customers. Learning how to defuse an argument is a valuable skill, especially when it means that you can protect your short-term and long-term health.

But why do arguments happen?

Rising tensions, broken promises, and personal issues can all cause a customer to raise their voice and cause a disruption. One study from the Institute of Customer Service found that 56% of the customer-service employees surveyed experienced ['increasing levels of hostility'](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we can see, arguments can happen for any number of reasons. Unfortunately, there is no way to avoid conflict in customer-facing positions. The only solution is to assess the situation and react appropriately.

So, how can you defuse an argument?

The first step is to anticipate the hostility. If you work in a customer-facing, service-based role, you probably already read small facial expressions and gestures without realising it. You're likely already equipped to predict when conflict might happen. It's important to look out for changes in a customer's body language to detect if they may be feeling unhappy. They might not yet have said anything, but perhaps their arms are crossed, they've turned their body away from you, or their fists are clenched.

It's widely accepted that verbal and physical communication tell us everything we need to know about someone's feelings. But what about tone of voice? Professor Albert Mehrabian developed the 7-38-55 Communication Model based on his extensive research into one-on-one communication. He concluded that [7% of our feelings and attitudes are apparent in words, 38% of our feelings are displayed in tone of voice, and the remaining 55% of feelings are conveyed in body language.](#)

When talking to a frustrated customer, you should always speak in a soft tone and ensure that your body language is open and welcoming. It's not uncommon for individuals who are in one-on-one conversations to mirror each other. Body mirroring is a phenomenon in non-verbal communication where someone unconsciously mimics ['the other person's body movements, facial expressions, speech, and so on.'](#) By presenting calm body language, you can help to defuse tense situations and arguments.

Of course, a big part of defusing situations is verbal communication. One of the best ways to calm an irritated person is to acknowledge their emotions. We've all had moments where our emotions overflow. When emotions are high, rational thought is the last thing on our minds. Your customer will feel the same, and they are just trying to make sense of the disappointment, anger, or sadness that they feel.

Try to empathise with them by offering your apologies. Phrases like 'I understand how you feel' and 'I can see how that would be frustrating' let the customer know that their concerns are being heard. Paired with a soft tone of voice and welcoming body language, these phrases can make a massive difference in negative situations.

Once you have initiated verbal communication, you need to identify the source of the problem. In most cases, it does not matter what the problem is. The customers' frustrations are more important than the problem. The best thing to do here is to take ownership of the issue and look for possible solutions. A simple, 'I'm sorry' can instantly defuse a difficult conversation.

More often than not, a customer will tell you about the root cause of their frustrations without you having to ask any questions. If they don't, you can ask questions like 'how can I help?' and 'what is the problem?' to move the conversation along. You should only do this after you've given the customer time to express their annoyance. If you ignore the customer's emotions, they will feel as if you don't care about them and the administrative or technical issue that has caused the issue.

Now that you have identified the issue, you can correct it. Customer satisfaction can be tricky; no answer suits every situation. In January 2023, the UK Customer Satisfaction Index reported a [decline of 0.7 points compared to July 2022 and January 2022](#). Customer satisfaction with complaint handling has also stalled, suggesting that many customer-facing establishments are struggling to handle complaints adequately.

Defusing an argument is about much more than just solving the problem. To ensure customer satisfaction, you also need to honour their feelings, give them evidence that you have corrected the issue, and follow up with them.

Let's look at an example. Customer A is unhappy because they ordered a burger with no cheese. The chef accidentally put cheese on the burger, which can have a whole range of negative implications. Customer A returns to the counter, frustrated because they are lactose intolerant. They explain that eating the cheeseburger would have caused them health complications. In the worst-case scenario, they might have already eaten part of the cheeseburger.

Understandably, Customer A has the right to be upset. In this situation, you should acknowledge the customer's feelings by apologising. Appreciate how the customer feels and how the experience has impacted their day. No matter what the problem is, customers want to feel valued. There is no benefit in making accusations, disputing the problem, or ignoring the customer's issue. Some customers, such as customer A, might have been loyal to your establishment for a long time. Depending on your company's policy, perhaps there is something you could give the customer to acknowledge their less-than-ideal experience. Even if there's nothing tangible you can offer them, kind words and a listening ear go a long way.

Is there perhaps something you could offer the customer in exchange? Maybe you've had to tell a customer that the dish they wanted is no longer on the menu. You could ask what they enjoyed about the meal they usually order and tailor a suggestion to their preferences. You could offer a similar alternative, demonstrate that you're knowledgeable about the food, and show you've listened to their wishes.

You might experience a situation where your customer is still unsatisfied. Some customers are so unhappy with their experience that they want to escalate the issue. Make sure to follow your company's policy on escalation and note these situations can be particularly tense, so remember to present open body language and speak in a soft, calm tone.

The last step in the process of defusing an argument is to follow up. It might seem unnecessary, but customers across all kinds of industries recognise this as exemplary service. You can follow up in a few different ways depending on your company's policy. The purpose of following up, whether that be evidencing to the customer that a mistake has been rectified or their complaint has been received, is to indicate to a dissatisfied customer that they've been heard. It also creates an opportunity for you or your colleague to speak to a customer once they've calmed down and are in a more level frame of mind. This can help to settle any animosity between individuals and create a positive overall outcome.

To practice de-escalating situations, you can create ideal responses to these scenarios.

- **Scenario 1:** A guest has arrived at the front desk and is frustrated to discover that you can't offer them the hotel room that they booked online. They wanted a sea view, but due to unforeseen circumstances, that room is now unavailable.

- **Scenario 2:** A customer tries to refund a top that they purchased from your shop, but they don't have the receipt. They become irate and claim that you sold the top to them yesterday.
- **Scenario 3:** A group of friends enter your bar and become frustrated when they learn that it's no longer happy hour.

If you take one thing away from this lesson, it should be that you are in control of a customer's experience. As much as we would all like to avoid conflict, mistakes happen, and we wouldn't be human if we didn't sometimes let our emotions get the best of us. Ultimately, you are the service provider, so the onus of responsibility rests with you. Defusing a tense situation can seem daunting, but with these tips and tricks, you can create a positive resolution for everyone involved.