

How many people would retrace the steps of a customer who had lost their wallet all the way to the train station? Probably not many. But Mary Nash, receptionist at Cannons in London's Covent Garden, did exactly that. Unfortunately, she did not find the wallet but the customer was impressed that she had gone to so much trouble.

Then there was the man who lost the signet ring his late father had given him. Staff at Cannons dived into the swimming pool and retrieved it within an hour.

There is nothing like a grateful customer to tell potential new clients how wonderful you are.

In both cases a situation which could have just as easily left a customer fuming was averted by the staff's willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty.

When you've had a hard day, it's all too tempting to shrug your shoulders and say it's not your problem.

But an unhappy customer can seriously damage your profits and reputation, so you might do better to take a deep breath and put on your most sympathetic face.

Staff training and guidelines

General manager of Cannons' City club Ian Mahoney likes a complaining customer. His attitude is: "If customers take the opportunity to complain, we have the opportunity to do something about it. If they don't complain they vote with their feet and won't come back."

Most clubs rely on good on-the-job training rather than written guidelines on how to handle complaints. They generally prefer whoever is on reception to resolve a difficult situation, but if things look as if they could get out of hand, or a customer specifically requests someone more senior, then a duty or senior manager will be called.

Customer complaints should not be left to chance – all your staff should know how to handle them. Champneys health resort in Tring, Hertfordshire, knows the benefits of good training. Marketing manager Gillie Turner says: "Our staff are trained in all aspects of the service industry so they will know how to deal with complaints. We have an on-going training programme."

But she points out there can never be a pat formula to dealing with complaints. "Every situation is different," she says. And not all complaints should be taken at face value. Sometimes you might

have to investigate the problem and then get back to the customer.

Your fitness club team don't necessarily need to go on courses to learn how to

"You have to be friendly, empathetic and follow it through"

Richard Ferguson



handle complaints correctly. On-the-job training in basic people skills should be sufficient.

Younger staff might not be aware of aggressive signals they are giving off, albeit unintentionally, so it is a good idea to do a bit of role playing with a "mystery complainer" who can observe staff and conduct a postmortem.

When dealing with customers, always follow these basic dos and don'ts:

- Never fold your arms – it looks defensive
- Don't lean too far forward – it can look aggressive
- Don't clench your teeth or tense your muscles. You might be doing this because you are tense or nervous, but it can look like



DIPLO

Does a whinge make you cringe or does a cross word get you on the defensive? If so, think again. *Andrew Don* reports

- you are trying to control your temper
- Look interested and don't interrupt
- Don't make body contact
- Eye contact is important, but don't stare
- Keep a reasonable distance – respect your client's space.

Your guidelines for staff should include receiving the client pleasantly and politely. When the complaint has been explained repeat it to the customer to check that you have heard it correctly. Analyse it carefully and sympathetically. Above all, remain calm and in control, even if the person complaining is red in the face.

If the complaint is reasonable, promise to resolve the situation. If it is beyond your authority call in a senior member of the team. You must act on a promise to rectify a situation and give the customer an idea of how long it will take.

The Sebastian Coe Health Club in Watford, Hertfordshire, is



Be aware of aggressive signals which can irritate an aggrieved customer even more

MATIC corps

currently following up a spate of member grievances which included complaints about malfunctioning showers.

Stuart Parker, director of sport and leisure at Jarvis International Hotels, which owns the clubs, promised the showers would be changed and they were very quickly. And manager Bryan Crouch has since telephoned those members who complained to ask them if they have noticed a general improvement at the Watford club.

Staff should be asked to write down all complaints and the action taken for future reference. Don't forget to thank

Most frequent gripes

- Sunbeds not working properly
- Broken lockers
- Staff attitudes and poor social skills
- Decor
- Lack of information
- Faulty gym machines
- Dirty pool
- Music
- Sauna, steam or Jacuzzi broken down
- Poor general maintenance
- Double-booking appointments and courts

the customer for bringing the problem to your attention.

When London's Espree club was deluged with complaints about the background music, it rectified the situation by beaming in BMX Digital Musical Express from the USA. Its policy now is to change the music every hour and customers are asked for requests. It also obliged when a customer suggested the lost property sacks have a piece of paper on the front listing the items.

It is possible to turn an irate customer into a loyal one, and word of mouth is the quickest way to bankrupt a business or ensure its success. Make sure your staff know that it is happy customers who keep them in a job.

Prevention is better than cure, so try to pre-empt complaints. Richard Ferguson, manager of the Forte Health & Fitness Spa in Hull,

tried to notify swimmers before they arrived that the pool was cold because of a broken boiler. "You have to be friendly, empathetic and follow it through," he says.

"The industry is not clued up on how to deal with complaints"

Geoffrey Pepper



Complaints which could lead to a claim

There is a big difference between a gripe about waiting times for the sunbed and dealing with a complaint which could lead to legal action, such as injury from alleged negligence. Staff should be made aware that anything which could result in an insurance claim should be passed to a senior staff member.

Geoffrey Pepper, client executive at insurance broker BMS Greenstalk, which offers the In-Shape package for clubs, advises businesses to contact their insurers immediately they receive a complaint which could lead to a claim.

Failure to do so could invalidate your cover, especially if you agree compensation for a claim the insurers might have contested.

"The industry is not clued up on how to deal with complaints," says Pepper.

Action to find out what your customers think

But don't just wait for your customers to moan before you take action. Find out what they want, what they like and what they don't like. London's Espree club not only has a suggestion box for ideas from its members, it also carries out quarterly surveys. Other clubs like David Lloyd use "mystery shoppers".

David Evans, boss of customer care specialists The Grass Roots Group, which has run a "mystery shopper" scheme for David Lloyd, suggests:

- Ask customers regularly what their expectations are
- Don't make assumptions about what customers want
- Research what members want
- When you make changes monitor the client response. You might think you have changed something in your club for the better, but you could be unpleasantly surprised
- Customer panels are more effective than suggestion boxes
- Don't offer free membership deals – you will end up attracting the attention of the perennial complainer who has got an eye on the main chance. ■