

Customer Service

5 Tips for Delivering Bad News to Customers

Most employees who attend HRD classes say they need to give customers bad news. Sometimes when we're delivering bad news that we wish we had the power to change the situation and give customers better news. Unfortunately, we can't always control what we have to tell our customers. But we can control *the way we explain* the bad news. Please remember these tips for providing bad news in the best way possible.

1. **Focus on the situation, not the person.** When we provide bad news to customers, they are likely to be upset or angry. If it seems like we are blaming the customer for the bad news, those emotions can escalate quickly. That's why it's important that when giving bad news, we provide helpful information without focusing on what the customer may have done incorrectly. For example, imagine that a customer walks into your office and asks if the office is open until 5 p.m. Would it be appropriate to say, "If you had read the sign on the door, you would see that we are open until 4 p.m., so we close in two minutes"? Of course not! That response focuses on the person and what the customer failed to do. A better response would be, "We are open until 4 p.m. today."
2. **Be honest, direct, and tactful.** When giving bad news, tell the full truth (even if customers won't like hearing it), explain the facts without beating around the bush, and give the information in the kindest way possible. If there is bad news that you frequently give to customers, plan what you can say that would be honest, direct, and tactful. Practice saying the message that way until it becomes a habit.
3. **Listen to the customer's concerns.** Sometimes class participants ask why we should bother listening to the customer's concerns in situations where nothing they say would change the bad news. Listening to concerns is always important! It gives the customers a chance to vent, which may help them calm down after hearing the bad news. It also helps you understand the situation fully, so you might be able to advise your customers about a good next step to take or of a way to avoid the same type of situation in the future. Plus, if we can't change the bad news, the least we can do is offer the courtesy of listening.
4. **Show sympathy and empathy.** Bad news can seem worse when the person delivering it seems indifferent, uncaring, or happy about the bad news. You can show sympathy and empathy by using a sympathetic tone of voice and by using words like, "unfortunately;" and "I'm sorry." It doesn't take any extra time to be sympathetic and empathetic, and it can make a big difference in how the customer feels about receiving the bad news.
5. **Offer something, if possible.** When you give bad news to a customer, do everything you can to be helpful. You may be able to offer information about other agencies where they can get services if services were denied, information about an appeals process if they don't like a decision that has been made, or even just your name and office phone number in case they have questions later. Offering something helpful reflects well on you, on Hamilton County, and may make a positive difference for the customer.