TOUGH LOVE

BY MARILYN SUTTLE AND LORI JO VEST
Learn to adore your most difficult customers — or at least what they teach you about customer service

If you have customers, you have a Gladys. She’s the one who demands more than most companies are able or willing to give, the one who pushes frontline service representatives’ buttons, the one who requires a higher degree of skill to manage. Yet how is it that some businesses prove able not only to satisfy their most difficult of customers, but actually turn them into loyal fans?

That’s the question we set out to answer in “Who’s in Your Gladys? How to Turn Even the Most Difficult Customer into Your Biggest Fan.” In this piece adapted from the book, we introduce you to the original Gladys and share the lessons learned from her.

A Moving Customer Service Story

Professional Movers, a successful moving company in Walled Lake, Mich., maintains a balanced approach to customer care by focusing on the details. What really stood out during our interviews with Director of Sales and Marketing Andrew Androff, one of the company’s owners, was his genuine interest in the lives of customers. He told us about Gladys, a difficult 87-year-old customer whose much-loved marble tabletop was broken by one of Androff’s movers. Gladys is the embodiment of everyone’s most challenging customer. She’s the one who pushes your buttons and requires a higher degree of skill to manage.

Gladys has a reputation among her fellow retirement community members as a cranky complainer who is impossible to please. But to her surprise, when she called Professional Movers to move her into her new apartment, she was treated with warmth and respect. When her sales rep, Chris, visited her home to quote the job, he noticed her prickly personality and made a conscious decision to focus on her spunk and tenacity. By the end of his visit, Gladys had bonded with Chris and booked the move.

On moving day, there was a mishap. One of the movers accidentally cracked Gladys’s marble tabletop. Androff knew she would be furious. Determined to set things right, he prepared himself to let her vent before she could even think about possible solutions. As predicted, Gladys had steam shooting out her ears.

Androff felt compassion for her while she vented and assured her that his company would have the table repaired, and that if she wasn’t satisfied with the results, he would replace it. Although he continued to reassure her, she was still spitting mad. Gladys wanted to talk to Chris, who had sold her on the company in the first place, and Androff promised to have Chris call her as soon as he came into the office.

Chris arrived dead tired after a long day filled with meetings with potential new customers. When Androff told him about Gladys and asked if he’d be willing to call her, Chris responded, “No way. She’s going to need more than a phone call. I’ll stop by her house on my way home.” Chris arrived at Gladys’s house ready to comfort her through her anger and outrage. Then he assured her that he would personally oversee the repair of her table. This calmed her down, and she thanked him for coming over.
Unfortunately, the repair was less than perfect. Androff knew he had to set things right, even though doing so would be expensive. He called Gladys and promised that she could meet Chris at the marble store and personally pick out her new marble tabletop. Since Chris knew Gladys didn’t drive, he called and arranged to pick her up and take her to the store.

Gladys is now living at one of metropolitan Detroit’s premier retirement communities with her new marble table. While it cost Androff and his employee Chris extra time and extra money to make things right, the payoff was outstanding. Gladys tells everyone moving into or out of her assisted living complex to hire Professional Movers — the best movers in town. High and persistent praise from such a hard-to-please person attracts attention. As a result, Androff’s company is now the number one choice of movers for Gladys’s retirement complex. By creating a culture that values compassionate connection with his customers, Androff has built a referral base that has helped his sales grow by over 40 percent in two years.

This culture of connection has been particularly effective in building a strong business with senior citizens. Seniors often move from their homes to be nearer to their children or to retire to a senior community. Professional Movers has found this population to be a good fit for its particular style of customer service, so it put a great deal of effort into developing the market segment. The staff members show respect for their clients’ wisdom, experience and opinions. They also know how moving affects their clients, both physically and emotionally. It isn’t easy leaving behind the security of their homes, their friendships with neighbors and the familiarity of their routines. Andrew’s employees are trained to be sensitive to the unique issues of downsizing. They are sensitive to the emotional connection to their precious family heirlooms that senior citizens feel as they leave behind the past. Professional Movers strives to give seniors the sort of service they would receive if their own family were doing the job.

“It’s like we’re their sons,” Androff said. “We get very close with their families. We interview their caregivers and their social workers. It really helps us develop a customized process to address their concerns.” This needs-based approach to both customer service and sales has helped the company become the top provider of moving services in metropolitan Detroit’s retirement market.

Your Move
Now, follow Professional Movers through the paces of pleasing the most prickly of people.

1 Neutralize Negativity. Gladys could easily be described as a chronic complainer or a demanding old woman. Instead, Chris saw her as spunky. When you look for the positive qualities of a challenging customer, you increase your ability to connect and enjoy your time together. How you think about your customers influences how you respond to them. When you begin noticing the positive qualities, your clients will start responding to you differently, because how you act is determined by how you think.

CAN YOUR STAFF HANDLE IT?

Now that you’ve learned to love your Gladys, or at least stop the eye roll spasms from starting at the sound of her voice, what about your staff? To ensure your staff knows what to do when a touchy customer tornado hits, take them through the following questions and answers drill. You could even role play (it can be quite liberating to play the part of the irate customer).

What if this irate customer is pushing all my buttons? Show her even more compassion. Sometimes the most challenging customers can turn out to be your biggest, most vocal supporters. It’s common knowledge that when children act their worst, that’s when they need their parents’ love the most. Customers who are acting particularly ugly may have a lot of fear or distrust that has nothing to do with you and everything to do with their life experiences. When you depersonalize abrasive behavior and see it as a call for help, you become a catalyst for the best kind of change. Look for the positive qualities in your clients’ negative behavior.

How do you find out their hot-button issues? Notice what your customers’ stress points are, and let them know what you will do about them. Androff did this when he said, “I’m leaving you with two of our best and most intelligent movers.” Chris did this when he personally drove to the customer’s house to offer reassurance.

How can I get this person to relax and trust us again? Customers want to know that their needs will be met. Become aware of your customers’ expectations and concerns, and let them know what you will do. Reassure them and take action. Putting your customers’ fears to rest helps them relax and work with you, instead of against you.

What is the most direct way to find out how to make your customers’ lives easier? Ask questions. Not sure what questions to ask? Tap into your curiosity. Start by asking yourself, “What information would allow me to be more helpful to this person?” Look back at Androff’s story. What questions do you suppose the people at Professional Movers ask to help them better understand the special needs of their customers?
Here's a new way of interpreting certain negative attitudes:

- Pushy or demanding = Knows what he wants
- Argumentative = Eager to debate possibilities
- Complaining = Sharing what she doesn’t want
- Rude = Willing to say what’s on his mind
- Slow = Deliberate
- Cold = Private person who takes time to establish trust
- Obnoxious = Intelligent person who feels underappreciated
- Cranky = Tenacious
- Loud = Bold
- Intimidating = Wants more respect and authority
- Cheap = Fearful of being separated from her money

2 Let ’Em Yell. When customers yell, they aren’t yelling at you. They are yelling at the company. It isn’t personal, but it sure feels like it. Is it possible to feel calm or compassionate instead? Yes, because customers’ complaints must be heard before they can focus on positive solutions.

Psychologists tell us that good feelings cannot be restored until bad feelings are released. Androff knew that getting angry with Gladys would prevent her from releasing her anger and moving forward. Even though his offer to repair the table, and even to replace it if she wasn’t satisfied, was above and beyond what other companies might do, he didn’t expect her to be happy right away. He honored her process of coping with her loss. He understood that he might feel the same way if he were in her shoes.

Your customers may have had life experiences that taught them to have a hostile reaction to bad news. By focusing on giving clients what they need — someone who listens — you move toward resolution, and it gives you a role to hang on to during the storm.

3 Get Personal. How did Chris know that Gladys doesn’t drive? He treated her like a person instead of a transaction. He talked with her, not at her. People are interesting. Develop a curiosity about them, and you will enrich not only their lives, but yours as well. Instead of asking yourself, “What don’t I like about this client?” ask yourself, “What do I know, admire and respect — or at least find intriguing — about this person?”

4 Know the Need. Although Chris probably doesn’t have a lot in common with an 87-year-old woman, he was able to ask himself, “What does my customer need?” Driving the extra miles to Gladys’s house may seem excessive, but he knew that she would calm down more quickly with in-person reassurances from someone she trusted.

As much as Chris gives his customers what they need, he also gets what he needs from Androff, one of the owners of Professional Movers. Androff’s appreciation goes a long way, letting Chris know that his actions are having a positive effect on the company.

5 Get in the Details. The 40 percent growth in sales came from all the care that Andrew and his staff put into the details. They don’t just meet new clients; they get to know new people. They don’t just work a new market segment; they work on understanding the needs of that segment. They don’t just move furniture; they help people feel comfortable before, during, and after they move into their new home.

6 Embrace an Oprah-ism. Yes, the mighty O loves to enjoin her viewers and readers to see every hurdle as an opportunity. While it sounds straight from the self-help aisle, Oprah, the business powerhouse, can attest to the power of tough lessons.

No company is perfect. Mistakes will happen. How your customers feel about your company after a mistake depends on how you handle it. If everything had gone right, Gladys would have been satisfied and might not have had a lot to say. When the mistake was handled with tender, loving care, Gladys had nothing but good things to say, and she said them to everyone.

Referral business brings success. When your efforts are the cause of referral business, you know you have developed skills that will increase your revenue. Increase your business abilities — and your customer service skills — by seeing every difficult situation as an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your customer.

Marilyn Suttle is the Founder and President of Suttle Enterprises LLC, a personal and professional growth training firm. Marilyn@marilynsuttle.com.

Lori Jo Vest has been involved in relationship-based sales and customer service for more than 20 years. Lori@lorivest.com. Find out more about Gladys at www.whosyourgladys.com
PR Fund
Full Page Ad
7.25”x10”
p.34