

By Jeff Dray

When you go out of the office and meet a customer to resolve a fault or issue, it's important to use soft skills to get the customer on your side. It is a given that you will have the technical skills, or you'll know where to find them. But the way you deal with people can mean the difference between a satisfied customer and a delighted one. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

1 Tell the truth

If you can't fix it straightaway, say so. There is no shame in saying, "I don't know." That's far better than trying to get by on a wave of false promises and BS. No matter how long you've been working in the industry, you will occasionally encounter a problem you haven't seen before. Honesty is always the best policy in these cases.

2 Smile and make eye contact when talking to customers

If you're trying to pull the wool over someone's eyes, you will avert your own eyes -- and doing this makes you look unreliable. Greet customers with a friendly smile, then give them your full attention and look them in the eye as they describe the fault.

3 Give customers a chance to find their own answers

Give customers a chance to fully explain what the fault is. Don't worry about the equipment until you have heard what the customer has to say. Many times, I have found that customers answer their own questions, if you only give them the chance to tell their story.

For example, a customer once remarked to me that his spell checker was not working; I had dealt with a printer fault and gained his confidence, so he felt free to mention another fault. He explained that he could access the checker by the ABC icon and from the Tools menu but not by using the keyboard shortcut. It turned out that he was pressing F6 and not F7. There was an opportunity to make the user look silly here -- it can be tricky to tell someone what's wrong without sounding condescending. But somehow I managed it. We laughed about it and I went to my next job.

4 Explain what you're doing

Don't try to baffle users with jargon, but do tell them what's going on. A simple explanation like, "A file was missing or corrupted" or "A circuit board has failed" is sufficient. Don't treat them as though they are stupid; remember, most people run PCs at home. In fact, many of them build their own.

5 Don't over-promise

There's an old saying about under-promising and over-delivering. It's a good thing to deliver more than you promised. It will delight the customer. Doing the opposite will annoy them, even if the result is exactly the same. It's just a bit of basic psychology.

6 Be friendly but not overly familiar

Be careful of sharing your best jokes, unless you're sure of the customer. I've managed to overstep the mark a couple of times, but mostly my jokes go down well. If it's clear that the customer is not chatty, just do the job and go. Your customers may well have other things on their mind. I think it is important for our customers to see us a real people and not just repair droids, but you need to read the situation well first. If in doubt, stick to a polite greeting and get on with the job.

7 Provide a realistic arrival time

Giving an unrealistic ETA can cause problems. I usually explain where I am calling from and what I am going to do on the way -- for example, "I'm just leaving Southampton and I will come straight to you. It normally takes about an hour, but there's road works on the main road, so you will know where I am if I'm a bit late." Sometimes, I offer to call again when I am nearer. They don't often ask me to do this, but they appreciate being kept in the loop. If you encounter a problem and are going to be late, you should call the customer as soon as you can to explain. They might be waiting in for you.

8 Have the customer demonstrate the problem

I have found that asking the customer to show me the problem can be a great diagnostic aid. If the fault sounds a bit unusual, it can often be the way they are working rather than any problem with the equipment. This also gives them a chance to close any work they might not want you to see, such as personal or confidential information. If you then need to close any applications, check with them first to give them the opportunity to save or discard. The worst thing you can do is lose their work. If they lose it, you can't be blamed.

9 Wind up with a little polish

Finish the job by giving the equipment a quick visual check and clean the screen. If you're old enough to remember the days when you got your windscreen cleaned when you bought petrol, you will know that the little touches count for a lot. If you use an alcohol wipe to clean the screen use it to wipe the keys as well. If they are still using a ball mouse, give it a quick cleaning. Removing the crud from the rollers will make the mouse feel better to use and the customer will notice it. A little bit of aftercare is well worth the small effort it takes.

10 Make sure the customer is satisfied

When you have finished the job, explain what you have done and ask customers to check it out to make sure they're happy. Ask whether there's anything else you can do for them. It may be that the customer has some additional problem you might be able to help with. Usually, there isn't anything else, but customers will appreciate the offer. Remember to say goodbye and to thank them.

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