



# 6 Step Strategy to Handle Complaints

Complaints Handling Toolkit

# Introduction

Our guide to resolving customer complaints that are received at the first point of contact.

This is a six-step strategy that can be used to handle complaints – especially those received by phone or in person.

## Step 1: Listen

- Listen to the customer – don't get defensive, argue or deny anything.
- If the customer is angry, give them time to rant – you will give them the opportunity to “let off steam” and this will make them more ready to work with you to find a solution – and you will have heard all of the facts.
- Keep a record of all key points discussed.
- Clarify key points by asking questions at the end of each of the customer's statements.
- Aim to understand why the customer is upset and control your own behaviour by not fighting back.
- If a customer's complaint keeps going, validate their feelings and focus on the actions that you can take: “I'm sorry that happened. I'm sure that really did cause you some problems. Let's now have a look at...”.

## Step 2: Empathise

- Thank the customer for giving you an opportunity to put things right.
- Express empathy with the customer's situation – say something like “that must have been frustrating for you” or “I can understand why you're angry”.
- Reassure the customer that something will be done – even a simple but effective explanation of why something can't be done to fully meet the customer's desired outcome may well provide resolution.
- Apologise for the problem.
- This focus on empathising with the customer's problem should calm an angry customer.

## Step 3: Gather information

- Ask questions to understand the problem from the customer's position.
- Allow the customer to calm down, they may revise their information. Some people exaggerate when they are upset.
- Get as much information as possible.

## Step 4: Involve the customer

Find out what the customer wants:

- Sometimes this may be obvious, sometimes not.
- Ask the customer what they want to happen.
- Confirm your understanding of what they want.
- Explain what you can do and take action right away.
- If you can't, clearly communicate how you will refer or escalate the complaint for the customer.

## Step 5: Action plan

- Discuss alternatives and explain any benefits or drawbacks.
- Agree on a proposed course of action. Be specific on what will happen next.
- Make sure the customer knows who will do what and when.
- Make sure the customer knows what they have to do.
- Take action immediately and keep your promises.

## Step 6: Follow up

- Follow up the complaint if you can – get back to the customer with any updates on the action plan.
- If any actions are delayed, let the customer know.
- If the customer remains dissatisfied, make sure that the complaint is escalated, and the customer informed on what will happen next.

# Author

[Michael Hill](#) is the Complaint Management Expert at Civica. Previously Michael ran his own complaint management consultancy, and is the author of two books, “Complaints management. Turning negatives into positives” and “Effective complaint management”. Also chair of the British Standards committee that designed a new complaint handling standard for the UK (BS 8543). He also represents the UK at International Standards Organization (ISO) events that debate complaint handling standards.

## About Civica Case Management

The Civica Case Management team enjoy the benefits of being part of the wider Civica group, giving us the freedom to help organisations of all types to better manage complaints and feedback, with the support and resources of a global company. Our business is the coming together of two key areas of expertise - software design and cloud architecture coupled with a deep understanding of complaint management, as both a process and the practice of consumer redress.

Our experience of system design and project management of enterprise level complaint, feedback and case management solutions in highly secure and regulated environments such as finance, local government, health and social care, central government departments and regulatory bodies stretches back over 25 years.

Our professional experience of complaint management goes back equally as long. Whether turning around customer service operations of public bodies by helping repair relationships with citizens, improve perceptions and re-build reputations; or providing the complaint management expertise to help finance operations in the UK, Europe, North America and APAC meet the demands of local and international regulatory frameworks.

Few understand how to apply technology to meet the complaint management objectives of today's regulated environments as well as us. Critical to this is uncovering the trends within complaint data and applying it for the purpose of Quality Management and Continual Improvement. Quite simply, we're better at Complaint Management because we love turning negatives into positives.

## Contact us

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