

Keeping parking rage at bay

John Crawley offers parking managers tips on how to handle difficult customers

There's something about the parking that seems to provoke a range of human trigger points for aggression. And those working in the parking business seem to get more than their share of difficult customers. People become aggressive when they feel that their own needs are not being met, or are being thwarted. They will often lash out at the instrument of their frustration rather than accept some responsibility for what they may have done to contribute to their own frustration.

Some also react angrily when they feel their territorial rights are threatened or when their lack of foresight and planning causes them to break rules. They also tend to get angry when they come across someone who has a job to do and will not let them get away with even minor rule breaking.

I know all about difficult customers; for the past 20 years I have been training public and private sector organisations in conflict management. Sometimes it is also a matter of dealing with colleagues who behave badly.

A few years ago I was training a team of local authority car park managers and their staff at a major city shopping centre, which had temporarily lost several hundred places during the Christmas break because of refurbishment. The team knew that however hard they had tried to inform customers about the lack of space and where to go for viable alternatives, some would still arrive expecting to park. And chances are they would react badly on finding insufficient spaces to park.

Working with this parking team, we first set out to establish why customers get difficult. It was clear that in most cases, people are prone to spontaneous outbursts when they are unable to find somewhere to park or have been caught breaking the rules. But, if handled well, the red mist quickly clears. If the person delivering the bad news can keep calm, not take the customers' frustration personally and show some understanding most people will still be upset, but their frustration will defuse.

It is important, however, to distinguish between upset complainants and maliciously difficult customers. In addition to good listening and defusing skills, you need effective ways of assertively managing difficult behaviour, and if necessary disengaging from the customer and seeking support.

What was interesting was that staff at the shopping centre were prepared to take a great deal of abuse before they challenged the customer. They were also often reluctant to ask for support from colleagues or managers. We worked with the team to improve their approach to personal safety, by



Parking attendants are extremely vulnerable to abuse and violence

reminding them of the three 'P's of personal safety:

Prevention – avoid provoking customers, know how to talk people down, spot the difference between upset and malicious customers

Preparation – know how to defuse aggressive behaviour, how to challenge it assertively and understand what support is available if you can't handle the customer

Protection – how to disengage, get support, set off alarm systems, let other people know if you are in trouble.

Coping with pressure

I am frequently amazed by how little people know about personal safety and how they are prepared to put themselves in danger when all the statistics suggest that while dangerous customers are still in a minority, it is a growing minority.

Some of the parking team we worked with had well established ways of listening under pressure, patiently

explaining problems to customers and ways of staying calm when others were raging. They agreed that when challenging persistently difficult customers it was important to avoid blame. Their experience was invaluable to the staff members who found handling difficult customers more challenging.

We taught them a structure to work to when challenging difficult behaviour — the traffic lights technique, which involves:

Red light - interrupting and stopping the behaviour

Amber light – showing understanding and acknowledging feelings

Green light – asking the customer to move on by moderating their behaviour.

Role playing for real life

People were able to practice these skills in role play settings getting their body language and voice tone right, and also establishing some core phrases that

they could use over and over to challenge difficult behaviour.

Customer service staff from another organisation we worked with were asked to give examples of when they thought that they had been handled badly as customers. Five of the group of 12 chose parking attendants, which backs up my earlier point that parking problems do strike a raw nerve with people.

During role playing described the following as the 'wind-up top 10 of how not to handle angry parkers' (see panel). Do you detect any traces of these responses in yourself or your staff? These are not only behaviours which are ineffective in terms of managing or preventing conflict, they can also significantly reduce customer confidence in your service.

Difficult customers can, like any other customer, tell the difference between good and bad service. If you want your company to be ahead of the competition then make sure all your staff are prepared to work with difficult customers, because you can be sure they will meet one before long. Firms must support their staff in managing these difficult interactions. Ultimately, the best way to get customers back into a car parking space is to handle their frustrations positively so they are neither too enraged nor frustrated to return. ■

John Crawley founded Conflict Management Plus in 1989. He is now a co-director and works as a trainer, consultant, coach, mediator and facilitator with both private and public organisations.
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The wind-up top 10 How not to handle angry parkers

1. The judgement call: being criticised for being upset
2. The high horse: taking the moral high ground
3. The brick wall: keep bouncing it back to the customer
4. Concrete face: not responding in any way
5. The broken record: repeating the corporate script
6. The empathy void : cold, distant reaction
7. Jargon: complicated inexplicable explanations
8. Hurry-up: various versions of: 'I've got better things to do than listen to you moaning'
9. Not my problem: dismissive
10. Glee: macabre pleasure in others misfortune