

Quick Guide: Handling Difficult Callers

We recognise these calls pretty quickly, don't we? The callers with high pitched speech, sighs, long pauses, short terse answers and increasing volume. Telling them to "take it easy" or "stay calm" will probably make it worse. So before it turns into an abusive call, here are the **top ten tips** to help you handle a difficult caller:

- 1. Make sure you are ready**, when you take a call. As far as possible eliminate any distractions to listening. Visual distractions are four times more powerful than auditory ones. Don't wedge the phone under your chin and continue typing - this shows a lack of respect and will further inflame the caller!
- 2. Engage your "thinking brain"** not your emotional one. This isn't personal, so don't take it personally. Focus on facts and statement, not emotions.
- 3. Take on the caller's issue not their rage.** As you listen, try to identify central ideas, as well as specific facts. It will help you decide what the possible solutions are. (This isn't easy as upset callers are not necessarily logical!)
- 4. Take notes while the caller is talking.** It will save you asking the caller to repeat the information later on.
- 5. Acknowledge the caller's concerns** and empathise to defuse the situation. You will also build rapport with the caller. Acknowledgements that are meaningful are specific, for example, "I can see that would hold up proceedings". ('Okay' is not a sufficient acknowledgement.)
- 6. Apologise for the situation** as soon as you detect the caller is upset. Remember you are apologising for any inconvenience experienced. You are not automatically apologising for a mistake you made.
- 7. Ask questions to clarify**, and make sure you have all the facts. When you ask questions, always say 'please' - it shows respect. But be careful not to ask too many questions or the same question more than once. Callers will feel they are being interrogated.
- 8. Summarise the situation** to get their agreement then offer a choice of alternatives to fix the problem, for example "Here's what we can do ...".
- 9. Let the caller decide** which alternative to use, so they feel included, valued, respected and have a say in fixing the problem.
- 10. Make sure you follow through** on your agreement and if you can't, then let them know - *before* the deadline is due.

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