

How to Deal With Problem Customers

By Stephanie Bond

When you choose a career in retail, you choose a life of dealing with the public, and you will quickly realize that every customer has a unique shopping style and individual wants. Indeed, in its most basic form, a sales transaction begins when a potential customer walks into your establishment with a need. Your challenge as a bookseller is to anticipate those needs and to be a matchmaker of sorts—introduce the customer to a product that he or she will like. In general, customers are pleased when you try to meet their needs...but there are always a few who seem determined to complicate the process! Here are profiles of a few problem customers and ideas to neutralize their behavior and perhaps make the buying experience better for everyone:

The destructive browser. This is the book browser who moves around the store, pulling volumes from one shelf and returning them to another shelf, or tearing through your bargain table and leaving everything displaced.

Response: Take a cue from libraries who post signs saying “Please do not re-shelve books.” Place tall narrow tables or baskets at the end of shelving with a sign to “Place unshelved books here.” Also, when you see a customer putting a book back in the wrong place, you can walk over and retrieve the volume and ask them a quick question such as, “Did you decide against this book? Too bad—it’s a good one.” If their interest is piqued, hand the book back to them. If not, re-shelve it in the correct spot. Hopefully you’ll either wind up with a sale or they’ll get the hint! Also, by stacking bargain books face out and on end (put them in plastic bins, if necessary), customers can better “flip through” the books, rather than displacing stacks of books as they browse.

The inattentive parent. Kids running wild in your store can make you (and other customers) cringe, but what’s a retailer to do? You don’t want to risk alienating a parent or guardian who is shopping, yet you don’t want to see a child injured, or your displays destroyed.

Response: Have a distraction ready for children who run amuck—putting a plush toy or an indestructible children’s book in their hands can be a huge help. Having a “play mat” or activity rug in your children’s section is another good idea for keeping little ones in one area and away from shelves they might be tempted to climb on. Having an adult in the area leading an activity—such as writing a letter to Santa Claus—is a great personnel investment. Or why not build a “gate” of streamers around your children’s section? Before you guide the child to the safe area, let their parent know where their child will be and encourage them to keep looking while their child is occupied.

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The time-waster. You love answering questions—you answer dozens, maybe hundreds, of them every day! But there’s always the indecisive customer who asks endless questions about a book or other product while other customers are waiting—what to do?

Response: Realize that the customer could truly be soliciting input from you to make a purchase decision. Or they could be quizzing you to highlight their own knowledge. Or they could simply be killing time. Regardless, when you extract yourself, try to salvage a sale. Say, “I’ll let you think about the book while I take care of this customer who’s waiting. Why don’t you read the back cover and the jacket? When you’re ready to take it home, I’d be happy to ring it up for you.”

The cover-to-cover reader. You expect a customer to read the back cover blurb, the book jacket, and perhaps the first few pages of a book before they purchase it. But what about the ones who show up on their lunch hour every day, select the same book from the shelf, and settle into a favorite chair to pick up where they left off?

Response: If they’re a good customer, don’t alienate them. Let them know you realize what they’re doing by saying, “I noticed that you’re really intrigued by this book—would you mind writing a quick customer recommendation that I can post on the shelf?” If they’re not a good customer, be more direct. “I’m sorry, but we’ve had some complaints lately about books that show signs of having been read. I hope you understand when I say that we have a limit of reading no more than the first 50 pages without purchasing the book.” Blame “senior management” if you have to!

The chronic book-returned. You want every customer to be satisfied with every book they buy from your store, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time. When a customer makes a habit of returning books citing that they didn’t like it, or it wasn’t what they expected, how can you break their bad habit?

Response: First offer to trade for a similar book. If the customer resists, offer a store credit versus a cash refund. And when they make their next purchase, you might say, “I really want you to be happy with this book—your returns are starting to raise red flags with management and getting me into trouble. Can I answer some questions about it before you take it home?”

Problem customers are customers, so you don’t want to turn them away—but neither do you want to spend all your energy on high-maintenance patrons who might in the long run damage your bottom line and erode employee morale. Usually gently putting a customer on notice is enough to take care of the problem, but if not, you might have to be more direct. After all, life is too short to deal with people who are determined to be displeased! ~**SBond**

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