

Mastering Customer Interactions: De-Escalating and Problem Solving for Tourism Professionals

By Rachel Glover, Director of Diversity & Inclusion Programming, STEM Consulting Inc.

In the fast-paced world of tourism, managing difficult customers is an inevitable part of delivering exceptional service. Today's travelers have high expectations, and when those aren't met, dissatisfaction can quickly escalate.

The ability to de-escalate tense situations and solve problems effectively can transform challenges into opportunities to build trust and loyalty.

With the right skills, every interaction—whether in person, over the phone, or via email—becomes a chance to create positive experiences that guests will remember and share.

By understanding customer needs, resolving concerns efficiently, and fostering genuine connections, you can cultivate an environment where guests feel valued and eager to return.

CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

Prompt and Efficient service

- Customers expect quick responses to their questions, bookings, and concerns.
- Long wait times for assistance, check-ins, or inquiries can frustrate customers.
- Delays in resolving issues can escalate tensions.

Accurate Information

- Guests rely on clear and up-to-date information about attractions, services, prices, and availability.
- Outdated websites, unclear signage, or incorrect booking details can lead to confusion or disappointment.
- Miscommunication about seasonal closures or activity restrictions can leave customers feeling misled.

Flexibility in Policies

- Travelers often expect flexibility regarding cancellations, rescheduling, or changes to bookings.
- Strict cancellation or refund policies can create

frustration, especially during unforeseen circumstances like bad weather or travel delays.

Personalized Attention

- Visitors want their individual needs and preferences to be recognized and accommodated.
- Failing to address dietary restrictions, mobility needs, or special requests can leave customers feeling ignored or undervalued.

High-Quality Customer Service

- Guests expect friendly, professional, and knowledgeable service from staff at all times.
- A perceived lack of courtesy, indifference, or inadequate staff training can quickly escalate situations.

Value for Money

- Customers expect services and experiences to align with the price they are paying.
- Overpriced or substandard offerings (e.g., accommodations, meals, or activities) can lead to complaints about unfair pricing.

- Guests often expect more for their money in competitive or high-demand seasons.

Cleanliness and Maintenance

- Guests expect facilities, accommodations, and attractions to be clean, safe, and well-maintained.
- Unclean restrooms/accommodations, poorly maintained equipment, or unsafe conditions can lead to customer complaints or safety concerns.

Efficient Problem Resolution

- When issues arise, customers expect them to be addressed promptly and professionally.
- Slow responses, passing blame, or refusing to take responsibility can escalate minor issues into major complaints.

SERVICE-FIRST APPROACH

Empathy and Understanding

- Actively listen to the customer's needs, concerns, and emotions.
- Put yourself in their shoes and acknowledge/validate their feelings.
- Strive to understand their perspective and what they are seeking to achieve.

Exceed Expectations

- Look for opportunities to go above and beyond, whether through thoughtful gestures or offering tailored solutions.
- Surprise customers with added value or thoughtful touches.

Proactive Problem-Solving

- Take ownership of issues and work quickly toward a resolution.
- Anticipate potential challenges or questions and address them before they escalate.
- Acknowledge mistakes or challenges openly and take responsibility for addressing them.

Respectful Communication

- Use clear, polite, and professional language in all interactions.
- Remain calm, patient, and kind.

DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUES

Handling difficult customers effectively is an essential skill for maintaining positive relationships and protecting brand reputation. Here are actionable strategies for de-escalating challenging situations over the phone and in-person:

Move Towards Conflict

- If you notice a visitor who has an issue, address it!
- If the issue is not addressed their frustrations can escalate, resentment can build up, and the individual could create a stressful and tense environment for everyone (both staff and visitors).

Remain Calm

- Your behaviour and attitude can significantly influence the direction of a situation.
- It's important to remain calm and composed, even if the customer is being confrontational or aggressive.
- If you notice that you are unable to remain calm, you should get assistance.
- If you are agitated it is most likely going to escalate the situation.

Actively Listen

- Give them eye contact, do not interrupt, be patient, and let there be silence (this provides space for people to process their situation and options).
- This is your opportunity to assess the situation. Gather information, identify the underlying causes, and evaluate the nature and scope of the issue.

Show Empathy

- "I can understand how that would be frustrating"
- "I'm sorry this has caused an inconvenience"
- "I can appreciate..."
- "I can see why this is upsetting..."
- "Yes, I see your point..."
- "I agree that..."

Recap the Situation

- Ensure you have the correct information and are on the same page.
- Show people you listened and heard what they had to say.

Take Action and Present a Solution

- Work with the person to find a solution or offer options.
- Try to resolve the situation by addressing pointed grievances they have regarding the subject at hand.
- If you don't know of a solution – take action by letting them know you are finding out or by giving them the resources to explore further.
- Reframe negative phrases. Instead of, "We can't do that," say, "What we can do is..."
- Offer something extra – like a discount, free upgrade, or a thoughtful apology note.

Exceed Their Expectations

- Make sure their problem was resolved.
- Thank them for their patience and understanding.

- Don't let dissatisfaction walk out the door, your interaction with the customer may be the first and last impression.

TIPS FOR E-MAIL COMMUNICATIONS

Respond Promptly

- "Thank you for reaching out. I'm sorry to hear about your experience" and if applicable "I'll look into this and get back to you by [specific time]."

Acknowledge Their Concern

- "I understand how this could be upsetting, and I appreciate you bringing it to our attention."

Provide a Clear and Specific Resolution

- "We've reviewed your situation, and we're offering _____. Please let us know if this works for you."

End on a Positive Note

- "Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We value your feedback and look forward to ensuring a better experience next time."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Glover, Director of Diversity and Inclusion Programming at STEM Consulting, brings extensive expertise in working with tourism and hospitality operators across North America. Specializing in program development, assessments, and facilitation, Rachel has a proven track record of helping businesses create safe, accessible, and welcoming environments for diverse travellers. Her tailored strategies empower clients to enhance their offerings, attract new markets, and deliver exceptional guest experiences. Through her work, Rachel has consistently driven increased visitor numbers, heightened visibility, and lasting improvements in service excellence.