

## **Customer Dissatisfaction: Eight Sure Ways to Enrage Residents and Families**

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As long-term care professionals, you have endured seminars on customer satisfaction and quality care. You've received tips, advice, and steps to "quick fixes" for those pesky problems with difficult residents and families. It seems as if you are doing all the right things and sticking to the plan. Think about it, though. Does it seem that you still spend far too much time trying to put out fires or calm irritated families? Do you and your staff find yourselves avoiding certain residents and families? What is missing?

We are professionals who have evaluated and treated residents in many different facilities with varying levels of care. In addition, one of us has had personal experience with family members in assisted living, Alzheimer's care facilities, and nursing homes. As such, we have been on the outside looking in and have observed certain destructive attitudes displayed over and over in facilities. So please accept our tongue-in-cheek look at customer service. The insights you gain will apply to every staff member, from housekeeping to executives.

### **Number One:**

When you get a complaint, look serious and say, "We're doing the best we can." This makes the complainer think you are working hard on the problem already, but there is some outside limitation to your efforts. Very few people will respond, "Well that's just not good enough."

*Families want to believe the best of the staff. Hearing that you are trying your best it is some small comfort to them, but remember that although a family member or resident might seem to accept your earnest reply, that does not mean that they will not tell everyone they know about their bad experience. They might even decide to tell the state board of complaints or a plaintiff's attorney. So it is essential that you also offer a solution. A better response than simply, "We're doing our best" would be, "We're doing our best, but we might not have thought of all the possible solutions. Do you have any suggestions we could incorporate in this situation?" Of course, it goes without saying that you must follow through with your promises.*

### **Number Two:**

Immediately blame someone. Make sure the person you blame is inaccessible, either because the person works at inconvenient hours or is not on site--Betty in accounting at the home office, the outside contractor, the staff member who is on disability leave... you know. This makes you look like you know exactly what's going on with everyone all the time. It also signals that you will deal with the culprit, which effectively removes any sense of empowerment from the complainer.

*Unfortunately, the traditional American style of management is to place blame and put impossible obstacles between the person with a problem and the person with the solution. How infuriating to be told that, yes, someone is responsible, but that the responsible person is inaccessible. Effectively, there is no solution to the problem.*

*Instead, of falling into this trap, accept the complaint, tell the person you understand the issue and assure them confidently that it will be solved. Don't mention who is at fault. Most of the time the system itself is largely to blame. No system is perfect, and blaming a scapegoat merely impedes the important process of continually improving your operations. If you really think about it, the complainer is doing you a favor by calling attention to the weaknesses in your particular facility.*

**Number Three:**

Call the family a liar. Of course, not in so many words, but indicate that their eyewitness account of inappropriate care is not correct, because your second- or third-hand information is always more accurate. This tactic is particularly effective if you avoid documenting anything not specifically required by law. The standard legal advice is, "If it's not documented, it didn't happen." That way, it's their word against yours. Be sure to appear as if you are hurt that someone would dare to imply that your staff's work is inadequate.

*Yes, you are around all the time and "know" the residents, but you may have become accustomed to such things as noises or irritable staff attitudes. An outsider may be doing you a favor by bringing something to your attention rather than immediately going to higher authorities. Likewise, documentation is more than a meaningless chore. Documentation is the primary way for staff and families to communicate things that happen at different times during the day. It is also the best way to detect patterns which may herald serious problems. Documentation is the single most important tool you have to engage in truly meaningful collaborative dialogue with families about the ongoing condition of their loved one.*

**Number Four:**

Be sure to stand your ground and never accept the family's suggestion as having the slightest usefulness. If you allow them to believe for one minute that they have a good idea, families will barrage you with their new plans for your facility and staff. You must never change the way you do things. Besides, if you change things, then you have to do all that inservice training.

*Families know their loved ones very well, and their advice is the result of their own trials and errors. Families want you to succeed in taking care of the residents. If you fail, it means they've failed in their choice of facility. Accept their hints and suggestions. You may be the better for it.*

**Number Five:**

When a request is made or a suggestion is offered, simply look the family or the resident in the eye and flatly respond, "We can't do that." After all, you are the professional. You know your business and your residents better than anybody. See Number Six below if they ask, "Why not?"

*There is no better way to create outrage than to reject all requests. It's one thing to offer an excuse, but to flatly say that any suggestion is impossible makes it clear that you're*

*not even trying. Not only that, it makes you look like you don't even care about trying. If there are legal reasons you can't do something, you need to say that up front, but you must open a dialogue to think about ways to accomplish the family's goal in a way that works within the legal constraints that pertain to your facility. Likewise, the response that "corporate won't let us do that" is infuriating to a consumer. We all know that there is almost always a way if someone is willing to help us. That someone must be you.*

**Number Six:**

If the family or resident persists with their suggestion, you can always say that there are no funds in the budget for it. Look really disappointed and frustrated. Be sure to mention that you often have discussions with your colleagues, who express the same dismay over lack of funds to do the things that need to be done. DO NOT mention that the monthly care fee is going up. The administrator will do that in a letter. Later.

*One thing families and residents really do not understand is how you can "poor mouth" your facility for its lack of funding and at the same time send them monthly bills that seem exorbitant. You are being paid to do what is necessary to take care of your residents. Sit down with people and talk about their suggestions, write them down and bump them up a level of authority. Engage everyone in the brainstorming and planning and keep them apprised of the progress you have made.*

**Number Seven:**

Look busy, but never make eye contact with or talk to anyone, particularly the residents. Especially if they are being too "demanding" at the front desk. This way, you appear as if you have lots to do, and they may decide not to bother you. See Numbers one and five above.

*Families and residents want to believe that you are busy with important caregiving tasks, and they don't want to waste your time. If you look busy, they will delay talking with you, and as time passes they will become increasingly resentful. In contrast, a simple greeting or just stopping to talk socially is an excellent way to convey your ongoing involvement and interest. Yes, you are busy, but are you too busy to find time to spend with them when they aren't complaining? Many families have told us that they would not have complained so frequently or so vehemently to nurses and administrators "if they had only stopped and listened to me in the first place."*

**Number Eight:**

Act as if you have no idea what's going on or who is in charge. A blank look can serve many purposes. At this point, it is up to the complainer to explain to you the whole situation, providing you time to stall and come up with one of the other seven responses noted above.

*One of the most frustrating experiences is receiving a blank look in response to a question. It creates a greater sense of urgency and anger. If you really don't know what to do, at least look thoughtful and say, "I'm thinking about how I can help you on that. Tell me a little more so I'll know how I can take care of it." After all, if you are such a*

*poor problem solver, does the family really want to entrust the care of their loved one to you?*

The most important point to take from this article is: **DON'T BE DEFENSIVE**. Accept suggestions, requests, compliments, and complaints in the same spirit. Listen--because you don't know everything and you can always learn something new. Families and residents want you to succeed, because they want to feel they have made the right choice in allowing you to care for their loved ones. If the families and residents are talking to you about problems, consider it a good sign that they believe you can help them. It's when they don't talk to you that you must start to worry.