



# SkillSharpener Web Extra

## Are you preparing your reps to deal with worst-case customer scenarios?

By training and coaching your reps to deal with the worst situations they are likely to encounter, they will be more confident and successful in any encounter.

Are your reps ready to handle the worst-case situations that are likely to come up in the course of their work? If they are not, says Richard S. Gallagher, author of *The Customer Service Survival Kit: What to Say to Defuse Even the Worst Customer Situations*, then your reps are probably not handling most customers as well as they should.

The problem, Gallagher says, is that the "fear that some one customer might go off on them" causes reps to "approach every customer from a defensive posture — and that ends up causing a lot of the difficult customer situations they encounter."

If reps are trained to deal with those worst-case scenarios, on the other hand, they will become less fearful of engaging with difficult customers and more confident and successful in their handling of customers in general.

### Brainstorm ideas with your reps

The first and perhaps one of the best things that you can do to prepare reps is to brainstorm with them about the types of worst-case customer situations they encounter and the techniques that have worked — or not worked — in the past.

"By brainstorming with your reps, you put the reps in the driver's seat to co-create your worst-case strategy with you," Gallagher says. "They are the experts, after all. They are the ones handling all of these calls. And the more they participate in creating the strategy, the more they are going to buy in."

You can also get senior or more skilled reps involved in coaching other reps in skills like leaning in, acknowledging customer issues, and others. "The last time I managed a 24-hour call center," Gallagher says, "I did all the coaching the first year, but by the second and third year I had the senior people on the team mentoring everyone else."

### Focus your training on "worst-case" situations

"One of the techniques that I have used regularly to get reps on board in terms of dealing with worst-case scenarios is to have a regular role-playing workshop on worst-case situations," says Gallagher. "We would go through our records and our notes of previous transactions that went off the rails, identify the worst of those situations, and re-play them through role-playing. And we would have a lot of fun role-playing those situations. With everybody coaching and offering advice it was very positive, and included a lot of laughter."

The role-playing gave reps the opportunity to practice techniques like leaning-in to a customer's criticism and mirroring the customer's language, avoiding trigger phrases like "I understand" and "You have to do this," and determining the appropriate way to acknowledge the customer's issue or problem depending on the situation.

Gallagher adds, however, that for role-playing to be most successful it should be done in small teams rather than in large groups and that the role-play scenarios should be customized to specific work situations that reps are likely to encounter.





### Keep coaching efforts positive

"Training helps," Gallagher says, "but it is really when you stop into people's cubicles, listen to what reps are actually saying to customers, and show them something better, that you really see the needle move over the course of time."

In fact, Gallagher would have managers "lean in" to reps in the same way that he wants reps to "lean in" to difficult customers. "If a rep has had a problem dealing with a customer, for instance, say, 'Hey, I can see why you are frustrated, and I can see why you said what you did. Next time, try saying this, and see how it works for you.'"

He adds: "The first golden rule is to treat people the way you would like to be treated. The second golden rule — which applies to customer service managers — is that you can never successfully criticize anybody for anything, ever. Especially when they are trying hard to deal with difficult customer situations. Never, ever, go to a rep and say, 'You did that wrong.' Instead, validate them and say, 'I can see exactly why you said this. Now, try this instead and see if this will make it easier for you the next time.'"

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