

Tips on Negotiating Customer Claims

By: Mike Huggins

Customer claims are one of the least enjoyable aspects of our job in this industry. From claims of damage done to their vehicle from you wash process, theft from an employee, misrepresentation of services or that they were just plain mistreated on your site. Whatever the situation, I always find it disheartening when these situations do not end favorably for any of the parties involved.

The most important goal of any claim for me is to win the trust of the customer and to prove that we are the safest process for cleaning their vehicle, despite the legitimacy of the claim. As some of us may know how costly claims can be, that cost is nothing compared to the long term cost of our customers believing that professional car washes are not safe or an enjoyable experience.

Below I have outlined a few tips that we practice at the glo car wash which have helped us deal with the many (I'll have to admit) difficult situations that we have faced in the past four years.

1) Positive Attitude

It can be very difficult to maintain a positive attitude, yet it is the most important step in achieving trust from the customer or accomplishing any sort of perceived fair outcome for all parties involved.

2) Find Mutual Ground

Finding a neutral, non-favoring space to meet that is as discrete as possible will help create a fair and non-threatening environment for the customer and hopefully keep the situation from the sight of other customers. At the glo we instruct to never approach with more than one employee to insure that we are not perceived to be "ganging up" on the customer. After the situation is assessed, if our representative feels that he needs assistance, it is then appropriate to ask the customer if it is okay for another representative to join in. It is important to make sure the customer feels that he/she is in a fair, non-threatening environment.

3) Accuracy of Information

Correct information and accurate recording will help make sure that there are no miscommunications and will prevent any "he said, she said" scenarios. First, agree on the actual situation and record it using simple factual terms. It has been a great tool having a standard claim sheet to gather this info. We call ours a "Customer Assistance Form" to avoid any negative words that invoke any guilt or that indicates this is a common occurrence. TAKE PICTURES! The cliché saying of "A picture is worth a thousand words" cannot be emphasized enough when recording and communicating the situation.

4) Work with the Facts

Especially during conflict it is only human nature to allow emotions to dictate our actions. As some claims are suspect in nature, it is best to keep a level head and always treat the claim as if it is legitimate, even when we think that the customer is trying to pull one on us. Remember, they are still able to continue to be our customer and tell all of their friends/family about their experiences at your business. Focus on the facts of the situation while avoiding judgment of the customer's ideas or opinions of what happened. Review the tangible data that you have access to, such as video surveillance footage or the condition of the equipment that could be involved. Once you have the facts to back up your conclusion of what did or did not happen, make sure to

share them and how you came to those conclusions with the customer to show them that you are on a level playing field.

5) Communicate Effectively

Nothing expresses your attentiveness on finding a mutually agreed resolution to the claim more than excellent communication skills. Ask questions, LISTEN, repeat what was said to confirm your understanding. Take a genuine interest in the customer's claim, even when you feel that they are being unreasonable, take the time to listen to their side and concerns. Use your positive attitude and humor to relieve tensions in the matter and let them vent their frustrations. Make sure to be the one contacting them as the negotiation progresses and they are not trying to contact you. It's easy to put your head in the sand and hope that it will go away, trust me it won't. Even if you do not hear from them again, don't think that they are not trying to hurt your reputation or damage your business one way or another. People do not like being ignored, so man up and face the music.

6) Win their Trust

Finally and most importantly, determine what your true ultimate goal is. Sure it is nice to fend off the claim and feel victorious for not having to pay a dime. Yet did you truly win? Will that customer come to you knowing that their vehicle is safe at your facility and that they will always be taken care of? Will they take this unfortunate experience and tell all their friends on how amazed they were on the customer service that your business provided with this little insignificant mishap they faced at your business.

This is your opportunity to take a situation and get some real face time with your customers. Not only are you able to learn the expectations of your customers, you have a chance, with the right tactics, to surprise them with how noble a business can actually be.

*Mike Huggins
the glo company LLC
glowash@gmail.com*