

gripe therapy

There's no need to run and hide from client complaints—they're *actually a good thing.*

By Lola Augustine Brown

As much as we'd like to think that we give perfect service

and that all of our clients leave our spas with ear-to-ear smiles and undying appreciation for our services, we know better. The truth is, we can't be perfect. People have "off" days, things go wrong and mistakes happen. And that's why customer complaints are a fact of life.

Since you can't avoid them, you should know how to confidently handle complaints. The first rule is, don't be afraid of them. The second rule is, don't just write them off as coming from rude or unreasonable people. In truth, in a service-based business the relative rudeness of the client just doesn't matter; customer service is about the client's perception, not the spa's.

"Research suggests that two-thirds of the time when customers complain about something they're wrong," concedes Janelle Barlow, Ph.D., co-author (with Claus Moller) of *A Complaint Is a Gift* (Berret-Koehler, 1996). "The point is that a customer will always perceive his or her complaint as genuine, so it needs to be treated as such."

Every complaint you receive is an opportunity to learn something about your business. Consider that most disgruntled clients will leave your spa without saying a word and simply never return, and you realize that an active complaint from a client is a positive thing. According to Barlow, it means the customer is giving the business notice, saying, "You do this to me one more time and I'm not coming back." The client is trying to make your services work for him or her, and that's what the feedback is all about. And in the spa business, where repeats and referrals are a primary objective, such feedback is vital.

© ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

April 2007 | dayspamagazine.com



Gracious Acceptance

“When somebody complains about us, the natural human reaction is to get defensive, which isn’t a good position to take when you’re trying to keep a customer,” says Barlow. Instead, she recommends responding to the complaint as if it were a gift. “The first thing out of your mouth should be, ‘Thank you for letting us know’ or ‘Thank you for telling me,’ because thanking someone is the first thing we do when we receive a gift,” says Barlow. What about the fact that this is a gift you don’t want? Barlow responds, “When somebody gives you a sweater that you just hate, you don’t wrinkle up your nose and say, ‘Don’t you have better taste than that?’ You try to look for the sentiment behind the gift. With complaints, you have to focus on the sentiment.”

Of course, this can be difficult to do when the client is raising her voice, insulting someone or generally behaving in an over-the-top way. Remember, many people display knee-jerk reactions that show they feel they’ve been violated in some way, says Barlow. Maybe the client is agitated because she has been raising this same complaint for some time and nothing has been done about it (never mind that you’d had no idea there had been any kind of problem to begin with). Sometimes the meekest and mildest of people turn aggressive when they feel they’ve been treated poorly. For you, keeping calm and being receptive to what they’re saying is of paramount importance.

Debora Gallo-Capaldi from Pucci Salon & Spa (puccisalon.com) in Scottsdale, Arizona, agrees wholeheartedly with this advice. “You have to kill them with kindness and then they calm down,” she says. “You have

to say, ‘Let’s get the whole story.’ I always tell them, ‘The last thing I want you to do is leave unhappy, so whatever I have to do to make you happy, I’m going to do.’ I want them to come back.” By treating complaining clients with respect and showing them that you value their input, you’re in an excellent position to retain those clients *and* learn from the experience.

“You have to kill them with kindness and then they calm down. You have to say, ‘Let’s get the whole story.’”

Once you’ve acknowledged the complaining client’s feelings, you can calmly begin to discuss the complaint. During this discussion, you might unearth additional information that may be useful to you. “It’s like an entry volley when the customer complains,” notes Barlow. Many complaints are the result of simple misunderstandings, and you may be able to resolve the issue by explaining something or referring the client to your written policies or price list.

If the complaint doesn’t stem from a misunderstanding, and directly involves one of your technicians, be careful not to jump to conclusions. Your only motive in this initial discussion is to get the whole story. Don’t feel pressured to make an immediate decision on how to resolve the client’s complaint. It’s perfectly acceptable to say, “I’m going to look into this and get back to you.”

Gallo-Capaldi recently received a complaint about a technician “messing up” a leg wax. “I heard only the client’s side so

I gave her a gift certificate to come back after her hair grew in.

After I’d already done that, I got the other side of the story from the esthetician: She’d told the client that her leg hair wasn’t long enough, but the client had insisted on having the service anyway, and my tech spent an extra hour using tweezers,” she



says, adding, “But what could I do? At the end of the day she wasn’t happy so I gave her a comp.”

Giving complimentary treatments can be dangerous, says Barlow, because you train your customers to expect free things when in most cases the client really wants an apology and correction of the specific problem. A better solution is to offer clients a coupon taking money off their next treatment so they’ll come back and hopefully enjoy a more positive experience. Of course, if a truly grave error has been committed, it may be entirely appropriate to offer a comp—but this should be a last resort.

Productive Behavior

Once you’ve received a complaint from a client, it’s important to share this information with your staff. However, if you haven’t already established a climate in which complaints are regarded as useful, your staff may not initially be responsive. “You need to create a safe atmosphere in which employees understand that client feedback is going to help them get better—not get fired,” says Barlow. “It’s difficult, but organizations that do this become fearless of feedback.”

When staff members can accept that feedback is actually a useful tool for professional growth, they’ll be more likely to relay all of the “unspoken” complaints that they observe, which Barlow says can be even more significant than the ones that are verbalized. We’re all familiar with the adage, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all,” and so many who might want to voice a complaint will choose to remain silent rather than go against what they’ve been taught. These unspoken complaints might include leaving a smaller gratuity than usual, no longer referring others

for services, being less chatty than usual, changing patterns in appointment bookings and acting nervously (pacing the floor, etc.) in waiting areas. In the right climate, such unspoken complaints serve as springboards for the growth of your business, as they’re powerful indicators of how clients really feel. Barlow stresses that it’s best to involve the entire staff in dealing with complaints.

Nobody has unending patience, however, nor should they. Sometimes, even being unfailingly gracious, accepting and accommodating doesn’t work. That’s because some people are never happy and choose to be negative. It’s a good idea to monitor those clients who tend to complain frequently and perhaps unnecessarily. Darcy Chambers, owner of Heaven the Spa (heaventhspa.com), in Sandpoint, Idaho, “flagged” certain clients on their

Refusing Abuse

Do your squeaky wheels always get the grease, as the saying goes? We do live in a culture that encourages complainers, and as a spa owner you may sometimes get the feeling that the client now making a lot of noise after her services had every intention of getting her service for free before she ever darkened your door. Here’s how three spa owners deal with such people:

Cindy Ajay, owner of Blue Sky Day Spa (blueskydayspa.com) in Sacramento, California, encountered a lot of questionable complainers when she first opened her spa. “I was giving refund after refund,” recalls Ajay, “but after a while I started regularly checking in with all of my therapists and found that most of the people who complained were one-timers who were likely doing the same thing at every other spa in the area.” Lesson learned, Ajay stopped giving freebies and started offering a 15%-off voucher on the next visit. Insincere complainers rarely came back to use it.

Vivian Haddad, owner of Vivian’s Day Spa in Bayonne, New Jersey, responds sympathetically to valid complaints but refuses to be taken advantage of by unscrupulous freebie seekers. “We’re very good at what we do, so when someone is being an outrageous complainer for reasons that really have nothing to do with the service we provide, I throw them out the door,” she says. “I’m very outspoken and I have no problem telling people, ‘You know what, this is what we’re offering; take it or leave it.’”

Conversely, Darcy Chambers, owner of Heaven the Spa, at Sandpoint, Idaho, handles all complaining clients with kindness and respect, no matter how difficult, and gives even troublemakers a refund (just once, though—they don’t get a second chance). “It isn’t worth it to have anybody who’s angry throwing negative energy at me,” she says. “It’s a karmic thing; if they want to do something dishonest it will come back on them. I do the best I can ethically and always try to stand by that.”



Encouraging Feedback

"The burden is on us to find out if customers are dissatisfied," says Janelle Barlow, Ph.D., and co-author of *A Complaint Is a Gift* (Berret-Koehler, 1996). However, since most clients don't complain, how can you find out what they really think?

1. Observe. "The person at the front desk should have a pad of paper to jot down client reactions, such as the three customers who looked like they were tired of waiting even though they didn't say anything or the client who was overheard talking about how good or bad one of your services was," suggests Barlow.

2. Talk to regulars. "Regular clients might have a high tolerance zone with you, meaning that they really like some person or service you provide, so they'll tolerate things they don't like," Barlow says. Ask these people about the things they don't like and you could learn a great deal.

3. Conduct a survey. Darcy Chambers, owner of Heaven the Spa in Sandpoint, Idaho, relies heavily on customer satisfaction surveys. "They help us to evaluate our spa, telling us if we need to change the way we train our therapists or whether there's a particular individual our clients don't like. This helps us weed out staff members who are less than professional. As a business owner you have to take a proactive approach to meeting your customers' needs and expectations." Surveys can be as informal as a simple phone conversation or standardized forms focusing on certain services you provide. Chambers' survey concentrating on the performance of her nail technicians was very helpful in improving services.

histories after their episodes of complaining. "We generally don't expect to see these people back, and if they do come in I treat them with kindness," says Chambers. "However, I always ensure before they walk out the door that they're satisfied and then I thoroughly document that."

Barlow has specific advice about serial complainers. "Every spa has certain patrons who staff members would rather avoid," she says. "These customers can be very damaging to the mood and spirit of the spa. If somebody is consistently grumbling about services or attacking the staff that takes care of them it's OK to say, 'I don't think that we can meet your needs and rather than continue with this because it's upsetting to you and my staff, it would be a good idea for you to try another spa.' We have to be willing to say that our services are not for everybody." ●

Lola Augustine Brown (lolaaugustine.com) is a Vancouver, B.C.-based health and beauty writer whose work has appeared in *Allure* and *Women's Health & Fitness*.