



Cranky Customers: A Bigger Liability Than You Think...

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As business owners we're all familiar with the old adage: "The customer is always right." While the underlying sentiment of trying to keep all customers satisfied and happy has merit, the truth is sometimes the customer is indeed very wrong. So much so that it becomes a liability for employers who ignore customers who have crossed the line and are harassing employees.

Customer harassment can come in many forms including verbal abuse, physical abuse and even sexual harassment. When you own or manage a business, the natural instinct is to appease the customer— but we must also protect the employee and work to create and maintain a safe working environment. When an employee makes a complaint to management regarding a customer's behavior, the first step is to listen, ask questions and let the employee know the issue is being taken seriously. Telling an employee to simply "ignore it" or "get over it" is not a good idea, at least not until management knows all the facts.

A good manager should know employees well enough to properly assess if the employee is giving a fair representation of the situation and telling the truth. Asking a reasonable employee for input regarding a solution may be the easiest way to resolve the issue quickly. As with any employee conference regarding harassment, make sure the conversation and the subsequent actions are well documented in writing.

The employer cannot take any action that could be considered retaliation against an employee for making a complaint regarding customer harassment. Cutting an employee's hours or dropping the employee from the schedule would be examples of retaliatory action. Ultimately you have to protect your employees—even if it means losing business.

Harassment complaints of any type, especially those regarding a customer, are never pleasant situations for managers or employers. But sometimes these situations arise and must be dealt with immediately and appropriately. Make sure employees always feel comfortable in communicating complaints with managers and make sure managers document everything in writing. When this is done, more often than not, creative solutions are quickly found that are equitable to all involved and cause minimum disruption to the business.

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