

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

What “Confucius say” is smart. But is it easy to handle difficult people?

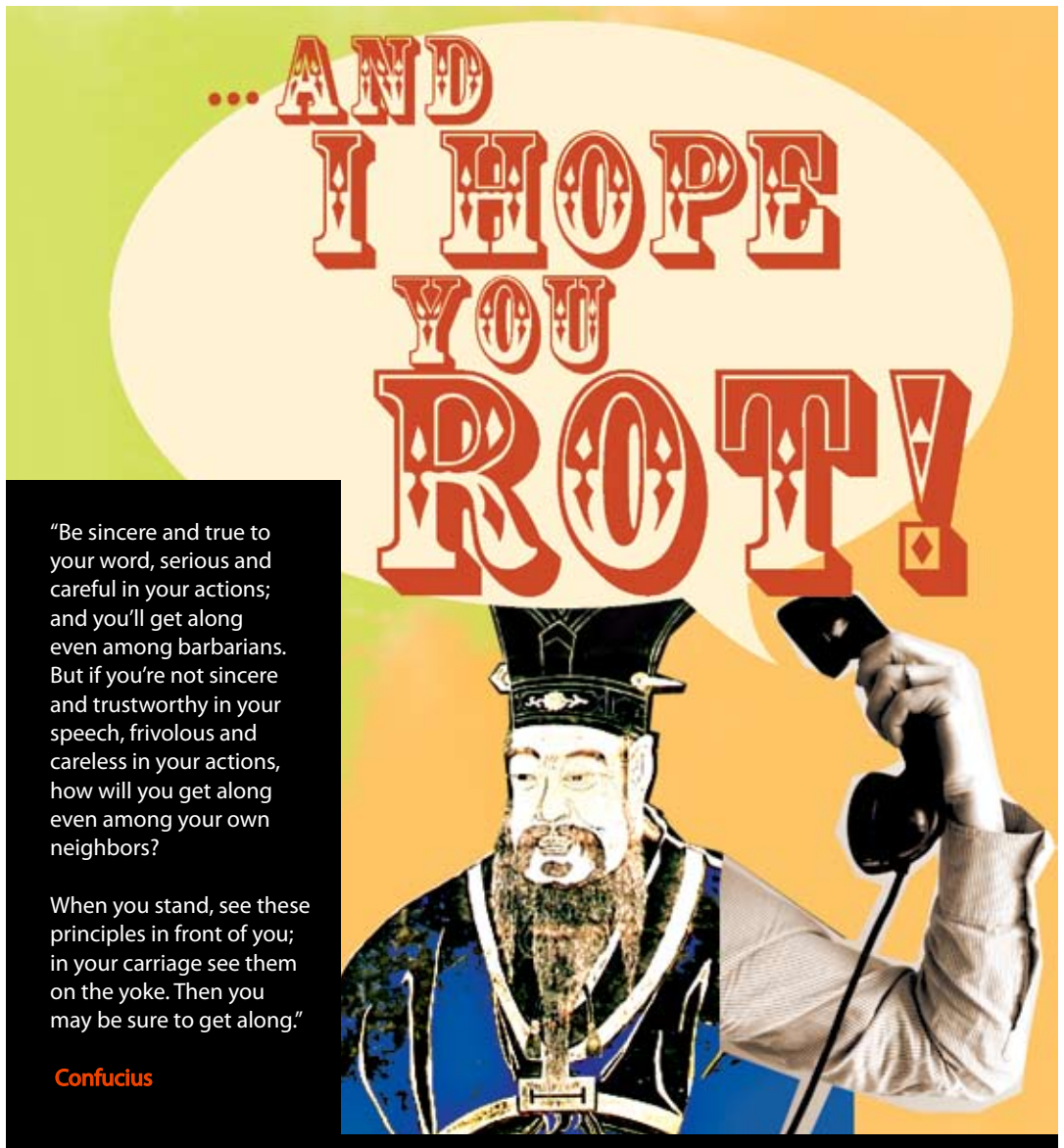
No. Is it even harder when they are **angry customers? Yes!**

In the towing business most of us think difficult people just “come with the territory.” Most often, encounters with angry customers occur on a daily basis. Whether one-on-one or on the phone, they can be much more than mere challenges. If you can’t handle and cope with them, they can hurt your productivity, dampen your morale, drain your energy, cause stress and simply make you downright miserable. Let’s not forget to mention what they can do to your blood pressure!

You can’t avoid difficult customers. What you can do is learn how to cope with them by shifting into the right mind-set and communicating with them in a confident, competent and non-combative way. The following are five methods and skills to assist you in this area.

1. Immediately shift into the “STAY CALM” mind-set.

When dealing with a difficult person, it’s easy to lose your cool, become defensive or attack the other person—especially if they are angry and upset. If you do lose control, you will make the person even more angry and cause yourself unnecessary stress.



“Be sincere and true to your word, serious and careful in your actions; and you’ll get along even among barbarians. But if you’re not sincere and trustworthy in your speech, frivolous and careless in your actions, how will you get along even among your own neighbors?”

When you stand, see these principles in front of you; in your carriage see them on the yoke. Then you may be sure to get along.”

Confucius

2. Remember what an angry person wants.

What an angry person really wants is to vent their anger. Unfortunately, they take their anger out on you and blame you for what happened, even though you are just doing their job. They also take it out on you if you when your driver simply could not get to them any faster due to situations beyond their control. Often, it’s best to let them have their say before you respond with any words whatsoever. This allows them to vent and you will be in a better position to calm them down.

3. Do not judge or correct.

An encounter with an angry customer who parked their car in the wrong place, or got themselves into trouble with the law is a common occurrence. It’s not your place to judge or “correct” them. If they are angry with you, never make statements like, “Didn’t you see the ‘no parking’ sign?” “You shouldn’t drink and drive.” Rather, your job is to service them, collect their money and send them on their merry way. If you can manage to calm them down and send them out the door in a better state of mind, then you have indeed, handled the situation well.

4. Get Comfortable with a Verbal Cushion.

When someone is angry, challenges you or becomes truly irate, you need to defuse the situation. You can do that by memorizing “verbal cushions.” These are designed to “cushion” their challenging or angry words and help you to service them more effectively. These words and phrases will communicate a sense of concern, promote cooperation and when appropriate, they can display empathy. If you memorize them you’ll get better results.

Verbal Cushions

Here's how a few of these might work in some situations you might face. As you review them, note that each example applies the use of the person's name. This can also be helpful, as stating the person's name shows customers that you are concerned with them as an individual.

- "I don't blame you for being upset."**
"I don't blame you for being upset, Mr. Smith. No one wants to have their car towed and have to pay for it."
- "I'm sorry this happened to you."**
"I'm sorry this happened to you, Mr. Smith. It's an inconvenience and an expense, I know."

"I'm sorry you're still waiting, Mr. Smith. I just spoke with the driver and he's on his way. Please understand that there are many cars off the road due to the storm. I appreciate your patience."
- "I apologize if there's been a misunderstanding."**
"I apologize if there's been a misunderstanding. Mr. Smith. We received a call and are responsible to remove cars parked in the area."
- "I can understand why you think you were overcharged."**
"I can understand why you think you were overcharged, Ms. Smith. We are a reputable company, and I assure you our rates are in keeping with all towing businesses."
- "I understand your position."**
"I understand your position, Mr. Smith. If I could do more for you I would. The property manager called upon us and we have to respond."
- "I would like to be able to tell you I can help you. Unfortunately I can't."**
"Mr. Smith, I would like to be able to tell you I can help you. Unfortunately I can't change what has occurred. The best I can do is to get your car to you quickly. Won't you please provide payment so I can process this quickly?"

“Sir, I haven't said or done anything to disrespect you in any way. May I ask the same from you?”

Smart guy! This is a respectful and professional way to handle this type of situation. Of course, it's not always easy to stay in control when someone is swearing at you. When challenged, your first reaction might be to snap at people or become defensive and entrenched in your position. But memorizing and applying these verbal cushions will help.

Admit When You're Wrong

One of the most difficult people to deal with is the customer who refuses to think they are wrong about anything. When you know from the bottom of your toes that someone is wrong about something, don't waste your breath in efforts to change this person's point of view unless it's something really serious. On the other side of the coin, if you have made a mistake, handled a situation inappropriately, or misinformed someone, be sure to say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong." Or, "You're right. Thank you for pointing this out to me." This displays good character.

A Final Word on Difficult Customers

When it comes to dealing with difficult customers, remember this: You can say and do everything right and still not be able to defuse the situation. A customer may slam the phone down on you or walk out swearing up a storm. Don't take it personally, and certainly don't let it ruin your day.

If you accept that in the towing business and in every business, difficult customers come with the territory. Simply do your best to handle them with professionalism.

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Christine Corelli was the featured speaker at the recent Florida Tow Show. She is the author of the four books including the popular, *Wake Up and Smell the Competition*. She has been a featured guest on numerous TV and radio programs, and has been published in a multitude of magazines and trade publications

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It will take practice using these phrases but, once you learn them, you'll agree that the use of these and other similar phrases that cushion a person's demeanor will be helpful.

To take this a step further. Write down additional challenging situations you have to handle with the best responses. Again, memorize them so you can apply them.

5. Learn How to Handle Irate Customers.

Spike, a successful towing company owner shared this during a seminar conducted at the recent Florida Tow Show. When dealing with extremely irate customers who use foul language and just won't back down he applies this verbal cushion.