Zingerman’s Approach to Handling Customer Complaints
Customized For the University of Michigan Law Library Staff

1. Acknowledge the complaint
   • Make eye contact with the patron
   • Listen, pay attention to their complaint
   • Agree with them if you can (empathy: “you’re absolutely right….”)
   • Get on their side (It can be you and the patron against the problem without bashing the policy… “I
     know, isn’t that frustrating? I can see why this would drive you crazy…”)
   • Wait until they are finished with the complaint before moving to the next step. Never interrupt.

2. Apologize to the patron
   • Make the “I’m sorry” part of this truly sincere
   • Better in the first person…”I’m sorry…I take responsibility for this, I feel just awful that I have to say
     no in this situation…”
   • Don’t blame away the problem – don’t bash the library or the policy.
   • Don’t make excuses
   • You can apologize even if you feel there is nothing for you to be sorry for… you can still be sorry that
     they’re in such a frustrating position.

3. Take action to make things right
   • The objective here is to do whatever you can do to make the patron walk away feeling better, knowing
     that they were heard and that if necessary some further action will be taken by you or a supervisor.
   • If you find you must say “no” or if you find you might want to bend a rule, follow the policies in place
     for how to say no and how to bend a rule.
   • Each person is different. Make suggestions about how you can help or provide other helpful options
     and listen carefully to how the patron responds.
   • Offer to get a supervisor. If no supervisor is available, consult with another staff member. When you
     bring the supervisor back, be the customer’s advocate and explain the problem to the supervisor. Don’t
     make the customer do more work by having to explain all over again.
   • Help the patron fill out an incident report and assure them that you will get it to your supervisor.
   • Take their name and number and have a supervisor contact them.

4. Thank them for telling you about the complaint
   • Why are we thanking them? Because this patron is the one out of ten who has actually voiced the
     complaint. The other nine have just gone and told twenty of their friends what a horrible experience
     they’ve had.
   • We thank them because we want to always be told when expectations are not met—it’s the best way we
     have of improving our service and making sure that our policies are sound.
   • We are thanking them for giving us the opportunity to make things right or better for them, and perhaps
     for others.

General tips for handling complaints:
   • Keep your voice low and stay calm – helps to calm the patron.
   • If a patron is truly irate, loud or a distraction for other patrons, remove them from the situation. For
     example invite them to sit with you at a table while you write everything down.
   • Give the patron your undivided attention.
   • Make steps 1 & 2 automatic. Even if you don’t know how to make things right for a patron, you can
     still acknowledge the complaint and apologize before you get a supervisor.

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