

by Randy Booth

Unhappy Customers

The archery retail industry typically involves a lot of happy people. People who just shot the buck of a lifetime, people who are buying their dream bows or people with aspirations of being Olympians.

But there's an ugly side to all of it, too.

For instance, take the customer who just bought his or her dream bow. It shoots great. The customer loves it. But it turns out the draw length is a half inch too short and your shop doesn't have the cam to fix that. So you special order it. You tell your customer it will just be a couple weeks at the most. He's happy. You're happy. Everything should be all set very soon. But after five weeks, the cam hasn't shown up. The customer has called multiple times and you've called the rep or the manufacturer multiple times but it's still not there. Now your customer isn't happy. This is one of the hardest parts of the gig.

Handling unhappy customers is something you can't avoid in the retail business, let alone in archery sales. It probably won't crop up every day but it's bound to happen every once in a while. Whether it's your fault or not, it's going to happen.

It very well might not be your fault in most cases. Take the example of ordering a cam. If you need to order it, you might call your manufacturer's rep and place the order. Then your rep will call his or her contact and relay it. Then that person will send an email or make a phone call, which very well could go to someone else before a cam is even picked off the wall.

There are a lot of channels to filter through. If one person drops the ball in that sequence, the person at the end of the chain - the customer - loses out and can quickly become unhappy.

The key is to empathize with the customer and explain the situation. If you can break it all down and explain what you've done to make the situation work, typically, that is all the customer wants to hear. You might not be able to promise when something is going to be ready but you can give the customer an estimate if all goes well. And if there's a hitch, you'll call the customer and update him or her as soon as possible.

Don't underestimate the power of a phone call, either. For the most part, customers just want to stay updated on a situation. There have been times when I've called unhappy customers just to give them an update, even when there really wasn't much to update. I say I called this rep, I emailed this person and I'm waiting for phone calls from three other people. I might not have any real news to relay at that time but my customers have always appreciated a quick phone call that at least shows you're thinking about the issue.

In my experience, a little usually goes a long way. Don't pretend you know everything and don't guarantee something if you have any doubt. The customer can see through that. But if you're honest and show you're fighting for the customer, he or she is going to want to keep dealing with you and your shop in the future.

Depending on the situation, a temporary replacement may work to make a customer happy. If you've worked in a shop during hunting season, you have undoubtedly seen a camo-clad hunter walk in with a blown-up bow in his hands. It happens every year and usually more than once. Some hunters can't wait for new strings or a part to come in to keep the hunt alive, so offering a loaner compound or crossbow is a great way to keep a customer for life. Sight

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the customer in, make him comfortable and he is back in the woods with a smile on his face.

I learned something in journalism school that has helped me in the retail business as well. In college, we were always told to “blame your editor.” When you need to ask hard, uncomfortable questions, sometimes sources can be hesitant because they might not want to talk about something brought up. In journalism class, we told our sources that our “editor is making us write this story” and then asked the difficult questions. That almost always seemed to work.

It can work with unhappy customers, too. For example, if you give a customer a price for a product and he or she hassles you to lower the price, you can say, “I’m sorry, but my boss told me I’m not authorized to make discounts. I wish I could,” whether you have the authority or not to do so. It’s an easy, simple way to get out of situations that can sometimes get sticky.

In my two years working in this business, my most “unhappy” customer had his anger quickly extinguished. Here’s what happened: he bought a new bow from us but he needed different mods, which we were out of. The mods were ordered but were backordered for a couple weeks. Finally, they showed up. Since our shop is in the middle of nowhere, the customer had to travel over two hours with his bow for us to put the new mods in. I grabbed the new mods to make the switch but the company shipped us the wrong ones. After weeks of waiting and hours the customer spent in a vehicle, we still couldn’t change the draw length.

Needless to say, the customer wasn’t very happy. I did not sell him the bow or order his mods but I was in the shop when he came in to get the new ones installed. We had never met but when I delivered the bad news, I could almost see him jumping over the bench and taking it out on me. Fortunately, it didn’t get that far but he did toss around the idea of getting his money back on the bow.

I cooled him down by telling him I’d have the company expedite the new mods and that I would call as soon as it opened that day. I even offered to ship him the mods directly so he didn’t have to make the trip if he didn’t have the time. I took his phone number and told him I’d call him as soon as I had any piece of information, no matter how small. After taking a walk around the store and weighing his options, he took me up on my offer and he had his mods in a few days.

It’s a simple approach and it hasn’t failed me yet: be honest, be trustworthy and be prompt. If you can deliver that to your customer, you won’t see many unhappy ones walk out the door.

Editor’s Note: Randy Booth is a bow technician and salesman at one of the largest sporting goods stores in New England. He enjoys shooting all year long, including indoor spots and outdoor 3-D. He earned his degree in journalism from Keene State College in New Hampshire. Before starting his career in retail, Booth was a newspaper sports writer and sports editor and covered professional sports on the Internet.



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