

Service Recovery

Are Your Service Apologies at Risk?



Ed Rehkopf



Being Defensive Is Offensive

Offense and defense are words of opposite meaning, yet often linked together. Their obvious meaning is demonstrated on the football field. One team attacks an area defended by another, trying to reach the goal. The purpose of the defense is to stop the attack, to defend their territory, to protect the goal.

Two words derived from these terms are the adjectives offensive and defensive. The dictionary defines offensive as:

- Unpleasant or disagreeable to the senses; obnoxious, disgusting.
- Causing anger, resentment, giving offense; insulting.
- Defensive means:
 - Intended or suitable for protection.
 - Carried on for the purpose of defending against attack or danger.
 - Having an attitude of defense.

Everyone has heard the phrase “a good offense is the best defense.” This idea is especially useful on football fields, battlefields, even chessboards. By keeping your opponent so off balance by relentless attacks, he has no time, initiative, or resources to plan attacks against your positions. In this way your offense becomes your defense.

People have natural tendencies. Whether inborn or created by longstanding habit, they are part of our makeup, and we express them without thinking. One such habit is the tendency to personally associate ourselves with that which we do. Just as the farmer has a proprietary interest in the fields, he labors so hard to till and harvest, we all identify with our company, organization, or place of work.

A corollary to this sense of association is the natural inclination to protect that which we consider our own or with which are associated. So, it is natural for us to feel pride in our work and place of employment. When someone attacks it with criticism, disparaging remarks, or complaints, the natural tendency is to defend it, to assume a defensive attitude. This is all well and good unless you depend upon that someone’s goodwill for your livelihood. When you work in the service industry, you literally cannot afford to become defensive.

When you become defensive, many things happen physiologically and psychologically. Adrenaline starts flowing; you tense up, ready to repel any further attack; your heartbeat and respiration quicken. Likewise, your mind races ahead to your next move or response so you don’t hear what is being said and you don’t focus on the moment. Knowing that a good offense is the best defense you become antagonistic; you raise your voice; you become abrupt and huffy with the other person, developing what is commonly called “an attitude”. At this point, without even knowing it, you have become offensive; that is by definition, “causing anger, resentment, giving offense; insulting.”

So how can you avoid this natural tendency to become defensive? The first step is to become aware that you become defensive when criticized or listening to a member complaint. Notice the dead giveaways. Do you get tense and nervous? Do your hands shake or your voice



quaver? Do you have trouble breathing or feel tightness in your chest? Do you raise your voice? Any of these symptoms reveal your defensiveness.

Realizing this, what can you do about it? First, understand two important things:

1. Complaints are not usually directed at you, so don't take them personally. Allow some distance between yourself and the complaint. Not too much, though; you must show a sincere concern to resolve the problem.
2. When a member complains, there is, in his mind, a problem. Whether you think there is a problem or not is immaterial. Furthermore, because of the nature of the service profession, the problem **is yours**. When considered in this light, the member is doing you a favor by making you aware of the problem. You should be appreciative and thankful instead of defensive.

In addition, there are some things you can do when confronted with a complaint.

- Where there is no conflict, there is no need for offense and defense. Don't allow a conflict to arise. Disarm the situation by cheerfully accepting responsibility for our problem. Listen carefully to what the member is saying. Apologize sincerely for our shortcomings. If you can solve the problem, cheerfully and quickly do so. If you can't, get a manager who can.
- If you find yourself becoming nervous or defensive, take a deep breath. The inflow of oxygen will help quiet your system and the moment you take to breathe has a calming effect on your nerves.
- If you find yourself losing control, try to leave the room on some pretext. If you are a server, tactfully excuse yourself "to check with the kitchen." Once there, take a deep breath and get control of yourself. Try to put the member's anger into perspective. It's not the end of the world. Resolve to overcome that anger. Take another deep breath and go back to the member.
- Go on the offensive in a positive way. Take control of the situation. Ask pertinent questions about our problem. Take notes as necessary. This taking ownership of the problem demonstrates a proprietary concern and a desire to correct the issue.
- While apologies must always be given, remember that easy apologies and facile excuses do not impress. Our actions speak louder than our words.
- Be sincere. You should have a sincere desire to help any member with a need or concern. If you don't, you're in the wrong business.

Two things you must never do:

1. Pass the buck or evade responsibility. You may not have created the problem, but now that it's been brought to your attention, **you own it** and need to resolve it.
2. Don't become defensive. It is not us against the members. We're on their team!
3. Responding to member complaints is one of the most difficult things we face in the service profession, but when we avoid becoming defensive, we often can create a



turnaround situation where the problem is solved, and the member satisfied. There is no more satisfying situation in service.

Service Recovery – The Seven Step Process

Despite your best efforts to efficiently organize your operation and train employees, situations will inevitably arise when members are dissatisfied with service and/or products. Whether you feel the problem is legitimate or unwarranted is of no consequence. The member is not satisfied, and your only concern is changing the outcome by making a speedy and gracious recovery to his or her complete satisfaction.

To better aid employees in making a gracious recovery, we have developed the following Seven Step Process, which can be divided into two distinct phases. Steps 1 through 4 constitute The On-the-Spot Fix, while steps 5 through 7 make up The Long-Term Repair aimed at correcting the underlying cause of the service failure.

Therefore, when a member approaches you with a complaint or concern, here's what you do:

The On-the-Spot Fix

1. **Focus** – stop what you're doing and focus entirely on the member and what he is saying.
2. **Listen** – carefully to fully understand the nature of the problem. Recognize that the underlying problem is not always the one that is being brought to your attention; for example, the complaint may be about the food, but the real issue is slow service. Sometimes you must read between the lines or recognize the issue is larger or maybe different than the one being complained about.
3. **Apologize** – a sincere apology is absolutely necessary. We (the club) and you (personally) are sorry for any service failure, so you should never be shy about or slow to fully apologize. After apologizing, tell the member what you are going to do to correct the problem. If he still seems dissatisfied, enquire politely how we can make it right.
4. **Make It Right** – quickly, efficiently, and discreetly (to avoid any possible embarrassment to the member).

The Long-Term Repair

5. **Assurance** – after the situation has been made right, approach the member (at an appropriate moment after calm has been restored) and let him know that the matter will be addressed formally by management.
6. **Notification** – if the failure is serious enough or the member does not seem fully satisfied, notify your supervisor, department head, or manager on duty so she can also approach the individual to discuss the situation and apologize.
7. **Report** – When you have time, but no later than the end of your shift, fill out a Service Issue Resolution, PCPM Form 180, describing the problem, your assessment of the underlying cause, your efforts to recover, and the member's mood after recovery (copies of PCPM forms are available at the PCPM Marketplace store). This form is used to formally address the problem and gives the general manager an opportunity to call the



member to apologize again and discuss the issue further. See sample Service Issue Resolution, PCPM Form 180, in the Appendix below.

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We say, “A sincere apology is absolutely necessary. We the club and you the employee are sorry for any service failure, so we should never be shy about or slow to fully apologize.”

While it never occurred to me that employees should be taught how to apologize, I caught two items this past week – one on television and the other on the Internet – that made me realize that there are “apologies” and then there are “effective apologies.”

Here’s the detail: Laurie Puhn, a relationship mediator, appeared on a cable news network to critique the Steve Jobs’ apology for problems with the newest Apple iPhone’s signal reception. In her comments, Ms. Puhn said that there are four elements to an effective apology:

1. Don’t minimize your failing or error. Make a big deal out of it – as it is to the dissatisfied member. Say something like, “Mrs. Smith, I’m so sorry our slow service delayed you...”
2. Apologize for the inconvenience caused. “... I realize how much we have inconvenienced you and your guest.”
3. Offer something to make amends. “As a further apology, there will be no charge for your orders.”
4. Say that you hope to have the opportunity to re-earn their trust. “I hope you’ll come back after your tennis match so we can serve you properly.”

A few days later an Internet headline “The Perfect Apology – The ONE Word That Destroys It!” caught my eye. I followed the link to Kate Nasser’s The People-Skills Coach. Here’s what she had to say:

*“As the People-Skills Coach, I start this post with the assumption that you are willing to take ownership of the impact your actions and words have on others. You are ready to deliver the **perfect apology!**”*

Well, the perfect apology is found in simple sincerity and the ONE word that destroys it is ... IF

- *I am sorry IF I hurt you. IF? Do you own it or not? Do you care to rebuild my trust or not?*
- *I am sorry IF that came across as ... IF? You are aware that it came across badly so why waver?*
- *We are sorry IF we have not met your business needs. IF? We wouldn’t be discussing it otherwise.*

*Your intentions don’t matter much if a team member or a customer is offended by what you have said or done. Rebuild the trust with a **sincere apology** as soon as you are aware of his/her reaction.*

Replace IF with THAT or FOR and see the difference.



- *I am sorry THAT I hurt you.*
- *I am sorry FOR the impact this had on you.*
- *I am sorry THAT came across as ...*
- *We are sorry THAT we have not met your business needs. We will ...*

Why does this little change make a big difference to others? Because it is clear that you are putting their needs ahead of your pride. Simple sincerity makes for the perfect apology.

It's also clear from these two news items that apologies may not be the simple matter we'd imagine. When teaching the Service Recovery Process to your employees, take a few extra minutes to teach them to make perfect, effective apologies.

Unfortunately, in our business, there will always be mistakes and failures, but what has gone wrong is done and is not nearly as important as what we do next. Managers should discuss recovery techniques with staff frequently and share stories of both successful and unsuccessful recoveries so that everyone can learn from our experiences.

Summary

No matter the quality of your club's service culture and delivery, there will always be times when the club's service efforts fail to meet a member's expectations. When brought to the staff's attention, these instances are the critical moments of truth for your service team and the club. Their response should never be left to chance and the club should ensure that employees are trained in the manner and means to make amends graciously to the complete satisfaction of the member.



Appendix: Sample Service Issue Resolution Form

Private Club Performance Management Service Issue Resolution

Name: *Jennifer Hansen* Department: *Food and Beverage*

Job Title: *Server*

Date/Time of Issue or Incident: *Sat, 8/16, 6:20 p.m.* Location: *Main Dining Room*

The Service Issue Resolution form is to be used to learn lessons from service issues involving customers. The form must be filled out anytime an employee uses his authorization to spend money to resolve an issue, whether by "comping" a meal or service, providing a token or apology, or doing something special for a customer. It may also be used anytime an employee witness a potential service problem or has an idea to improve service or service delivery.

Name(s) of Customer(s): *Mr. and Mrs. Robert Jones and two children*

Describe Service Issue or Incident:

Mr. Jones ordered his NY Strip Steak rare. When Mr. Jones cut into his steak, it was cooked medium. In checking with the kitchen I discovered that John Thompson picked up the wrong plate and served Mr. Jones' steak to one of his tables. It took the kitchen ten minutes to prepare another steak. Mr. Jones was not happy since they were on their way to the movies.

Continue on back if necessary

Contributing Factors to Issue or Incident:

As busy as we were Saturday night, we did not have an expediter. At the time I picked up my order there must have been six other orders in the window. An expediter may have prevented the problem.

Resolution of Issue or Incident:

I "comped" Mr. Jones' meal and brought complimentary desserts for his children while he was finishing his dinner. I overheard Mr. Jones tell his wife that this was the second time in the past month that his steak had not been prepared as he ordered it.

Recommend Follow-up Phone Call: Yes No by whom: GM Dining Room Manager

Suggested Process Improvement to Avoid Future Issues:

In addition to an expediter on all busy nights, why don't we order some plastic markers to put into the steaks to indicate the degree of doneness? It might preclude servers picking up the wrong orders.

Employee's Signature: *Jennifer Hansen* Date: *8/16/18*

Supervisor's Signature: *Michael Renzi* Date: *8/17/18*

About the Author

Ed Rehkopf is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and received a Master of Professional Studies degree in Hospitality Management from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. During his long and varied career, he has managed two historic hotels, managed at a four-star desert resort, directed operations for a regional hotel chain, opened two golf and country clubs, worked in golf course development, and launched a portal web site for the club industry.