

Difficult Clients: How To Handle Them With Ease

As most photographers know, pressing the shutter is only the smallest part of making a successful portrait sale. No matter how skilled a technician or how creative an artist, you still have to devote much of your time to customer service. The bad news is that you occasionally encounter difficult customers. The good news is that you can turn most of these difficult clients into your most ardent supporters—if you handle their complaints properly.

Keep your cool. The first step in gaining control when an unhappy client confronts you is to keep yourself under control. Complaints aren't any fun to hear, and often the complainer's attitude or behavior is unpleasant or challenging. He or she has come to "push" on you. Remember that if you push back, the unhappy client will just push harder. So above all, keep your cool.

Empathize with your client. Let the client know how concerned you are. Explain that you know how it feels to be dissatisfied, and you don't want any of your valued clients to feel that way about your business. Assure him or her that you will do your utmost to rectify the problem.

Assess the problem. Are you responsible for the problem, or is the client making an unreasonable demand? The answer to this question will dictate how you proceed.

What to do if you created the problem:

Acknowledge the error. Nothing calms an irate client faster than acknowledging your error. Most people expect resistance when they make a complaint, so they come ready to explode. Remove the resistance and there is no need for an explosion.

Suggest a remedy. Before you can do this, make sure you understand how your error has affected the client. Then, suggest an appropriate way to rectify the problem(s) that your error has created.

Make sure that client agrees that the remedy is satisfactory. This agreement will help to eliminate further problems—such as promising to remake a portrait on a rush basis, only to have the client demand a discount later on because the work was late in the first place.

Make sure the correction is achieved. Nothing is more infuriating to a client than to be promised that a problem will be corrected, and then have that promise unfulfilled. Most people are reasonable when a first mistake is made, but they are entitled to be righteously indignant the second time around.

What to do if the client is being unreasonable:

Look for “unspoken” issues. Often, the client’s complaint may have nothing to do with the quality of your product or service. “I’m not happy with the picture,” when you think it’s just great, could mean anything: the client is having financial problems, he doesn’t understand why you vignettted the corners, or she didn’t like her hairdo and was afraid to say so when she viewed the previews. In an extreme case, perhaps there’s an underlying personal situation—such as illness—that’s affecting the customer’s behavior.

Ask gentle questions to reveal hidden issues. “Do you mind if I ask if you are you are satisfied with your hairdo in the portrait?” or “Do you like the outfit your daughter is wearing?” Sometimes, however, you need to be more direct. If you suspect there is a financial problem, you may have to ask, “Are you concerned about the price?” If money is the issue, the client probably will admit it, and you can suggest that the balance of the account be paid in installments. If finances aren’t the problem, most people will tell you what’s on their mind because they don’t want you to think they can’t afford to pay.

With most unspoken issues, you are dealing with clients who themselves are dealing with something troubling. When you approach their situation from a sympathetic, problem-solving perspective, you eliminate a confrontational atmosphere and stand a good chance of providing a solution that will earn the client’s gratitude.

Have the client suggest a remedy. “What can I do to please you?” is a good question to ask a client who appears to be unreasonable. The answer will help you to respond appropriately. If the remedy makes sense, then agree to it, and follow through in the same manner that you would if you had been directly responsible for the problem. Remember, you may not agree that you created a problem, but when the client is not pleased, the effect is the same from his or her perspective. So do whatever you can—within reason—to please that client.

Always maintain the integrity of your business. Most businesses are likely to encounter one or more unreasonable clients. Some are just out to get something for nothing, and others are simply miserable people. From a management standpoint, your responsibility in dealing with such people is to maintain the integrity of your business.

For example, when a client claims he is unhappy with your photography, but will be satisfied if you deduct a percentage off his bill, then you know he just wants something for nothing. Were you to give in to this demand, you would be breaking faith with those clients who pay in full. The best thing to do in such a case is tell the client that you have a money-back guarantee on your work, and the last thing you want is for him to leave your studio with work that he’s not happy with. Therefore, you are prepared to refund his money. Now you have called the client’s bluff: either he pays in full, acknowledging that the work is satisfactory, or his money is refunded and the portraits that he no doubt wants are no longer available to him.

If you encounter the type of client who simply is a miserable human being, the money-back offer also is the best way to proceed. Yes, you may take a loss on that single transaction, but it is better than subjecting yourself and your staff to further abuse.

Logistical Considerations

When a client comes to your studio with a complaint, take her to an area where you can discuss the matter privately. Don't let the discussion take place in an area of your business where other clients can hear what's going on. After you're in a private area, offer to get her a cup of coffee and be as hospitable as possible. It's hard for most people to maintain their anger when they are being treated so cordially.

When you encounter an angry telephone caller, let the caller vent his displeasure. Then tell him you'll call back as soon as you research the situation. This will give you time to collect your thoughts, and when you make the return call, you will have the tactical advantage of intruding on him at a time when he is likely to have his mind on other issues.

By approaching unhappy clients from a dispassionate and problem-solving perspective such as those outlined above, you will improve your ability to deal with one of the most troublesome aspects of studio management.