

Conflict Resolution Strategies for Your Hotel

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Image from littlehotelier.com

It is just me or does it seem that the typical hotel guest of today is far more short-tempered, quick to go into a rage, often appears to be looking for problems, and arrive with the intention to take advantage of their selected accommodations for the evening, rather than just enjoy their stay? If some of these challenges sound familiar, this article might be of interest to you. May hotels, restaurants, dry cleaners, and gas station attendants to name a few, are experiencing incidents of increased irritability, verbal abuse and, in some cases even physical alternations. And this is happening across the globe. Many of our HPS clients also consider these changes in guest behavior are also creating more internal conflicts among employees and management. This article will help the reader identify some of the factors causing the changes in customer behavior and share the types of resolution strategies to help resolve such conflicts.



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So why is everyone so angry all of a sudden? Unruly airline passengers, disorderly customers, reckless drivers—there have been some disheartening stories (to say the least) of people behaving badly to great extremes. So, what gives? Why does it seem like everyone is filled with such rage? “In the context of this prolonged pandemic, people are experiencing a broad range of difficult emotions, including [anxiety](#), worry, sadness, despair and guilt,” says [Lisa MacLean, M.D.](#), a psychiatrist at Henry Ford Health. “But one emotion stands out above the rest and that is anger. Anger is a normal reaction to stress. It’s a sign of our distress and an example of our suffering. We have all experienced social isolation, a loss of routine, increased fear and prolonged uncertainty, [grief and loss](#)—even grieving the way things used to be.”

Some of the factor’s hotel operators and their management teams have been experiencing include:

- From the hotels perspective:
 - Many services previously provided to guests at hotels have not yet returned and guests are now questioning the value they are getting for the rates paid.
 - May hotels continue to be challenges with staffing shortages impacting the timeliness of servicing their guests
- From a guest perspective:
 - Some guests seem to have an inherent lack of trust or belief that what the hotel staff is telling them is not truthful.
 - Some guests have started staying at hotels with the implied motive of taking advantage of satisfaction guarantees, and in some cases even attempting to fabricate problems.
 - Many guests are quick to anger, extremely irritable, and impatient during their interaction with the front desk, bell staff, and food and beverage outlets.
 - Hotels have seen a sharp increase in their staff being verbally abused with guests using offensive language, and in some more extreme cases, they have been subject to racially inappropriate comments.

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De-escalating these situations professionally and consistently by your front-line staff and management is imperative. For example, by simply introducing themselves, remaining calm, listening closely (which will allow these guests the time they need to get it all off their chest), and reassuring your guest that you understand their concern and will work to find a solution that is acceptable to all parties, will address most concerns.

Dealing with guest conflict is one the hardest things employees face in the service industry; if poorly managed, an on-property complaint can escalate quickly and also translate into negative online reviews. Such reviews can then frighten prospective guests away and put a permanent scar on the reputation and revenue of your business. It may not seem like it at times, but when guests take the time to bring an issue to your attention, consider it a gift. They're giving you the opportunity to make things right, rather than the alternative of them saying nothing and never returning! The way you respond will have a decisive impact on the outcome.

Here are 6 guidelines for managing guest conflict in a way that prevents negative reviews and leaves guests feeling positive about you and your business.

1. Manage expectations

- Guests arrive at your door with expectations of the quality, value and service your business will provide. If expectations are not met, conflict can result.
- Preventing conflict starts with setting realistic expectations of the experience you provide. Ensure that descriptions, imagery and other information on your website, promotional materials and listings on third-party sites are an accurate reflection of your business.
- Avoid superlatives in promotional materials like "best value", "ultra-luxurious" and "uncompromising service" unless you're confident you can deliver every time. Businesses are often called out in reviews over such claims. It's better to under-promise and over-deliver.

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2. Be aware of triggers

Complaints in reviews are often less about the problem than about how staff handled the problem when it was brought to their attention. Triggers are things an employee does or says that make a guest angry. The more emotional a guest becomes, the harder it will be to reason with him. There are three types of triggers:

- **Visual triggers:** include gestures, body language, facial expressions, posture, personal presentation and environment. If your jaw is clenched, you avoid eye contact or your arms are folded, the guest may interpret this as apathy, inflexibility or even aggression. A messy workplace or disheveled appearance may also indicate a lack of concern. Show guests that you care by establishing eye contact, using open body language and ensuring that your surroundings are tidy and professional.
- **Verbal triggers:** are related to the things you say. Interrupting can escalate a tense situation, as can telling guests they are wrong, refusing to accept responsibility and citing policy. Avoid saying things like "You should have" and "I can't"; instead, tell the guest what you can do.
- **Vocal triggers:** are related to the tone, volume and speed of your voice. Speaking too quickly can confuse or irritate a guest, whereas speaking slowly or loudly can come across as patronizing. Strive to speak clearly, with a strong, confident voice and a soothing tone.

In face-to-face interactions, visual and vocal cues play the dominant role. On the telephone, you must rely on verbal and vocal cues to convey meaning. In social media and email, you are limited to verbal cues, so choice of words is especially important.

3. Maintain a positive attitude

- Be aware that you too have triggers. If a guest says something offensive or untrue, you may become annoyed and less willing to help. Work hard to control your triggers. Remind yourself that it's your job to please customers, and sometimes that means setting aside your own feelings.
- Attitude is key. Rather than dread having to deal with upset guests, think of these situations as a welcome challenge. Tell yourself, "I can handle this. I'm going to turn

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this guest around." A positive attitude and great service can help you calm down even the most irate of guests.

4. Understand what upset guests want

Most people are reasonable. They don't expect perfection, and they understand that mistakes can happen. Their needs are simple. They want:

- **An empathetic ear.** Put yourself in the guest's shoes. Traveling can be tiring and stressful, and hotels can be intimidating and confusing. Put guests at ease by reassuring them that you understand and are here to help. Introduce yourself and use their name to establish a rapport. Don't deprive them of their need to vent. Give them your full attention, listen carefully and ask questions to clarify the situation.
- **An apology.** A sincere apology is sometimes enough to appease an upset customer. People want acknowledgement when they feel they've been wronged. It may not be your fault, but that shouldn't stop you from regretting that they're upset and wanting to rectify the situation.
- **A quick solution.** The longer it takes to fix the problem, the more upset the guest is likely to become. If guests are bounced around and made to repeat their story, it will increase their feelings of being hard-done-by. Don't assume they're looking for compensation. Rather than impose a solution that might not be the right fit, suggest a few options and work with the guest to find a mutually satisfactory solution.
- **Follow-up.** Tell the guest how and when you will follow up. Be sure not to make promises you can't keep. Record details in the guest's profile, inform colleagues of the situation, and take the necessary steps to ensure the problem won't recur. A follow-up call from management or a note and amenity to the guest's room will reinforce your care and concern.

5. Support, train & empower staff

- Management should provide employees with guidelines, training and empowerment to resolve issues quickly and effectively. If staff know how far they can go to appease upset guests and that management will support their decisions, they will act with more confidence.

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- If a guest's demands are unreasonable, weigh the costs of fulfilling the request against the risks of not doing so. Suggest meeting the guest partway. For example, you might say, "I'm not at liberty to comp your room, but as a gesture of our regret we can offer a 25% discount. Would that be satisfactory?" If you're not authorized to offer compensation, say you'll discuss it with a manager and let the guest know when to expect a response.
- If a customer threatens to write a bad review if you don't give in to unreasonable demands, handle the situation with your usual courtesy and professionalism and work hard to find a solution. Review blackmail is against TripAdvisor's terms of service. Go to TripAdvisor's Management Center and complete a review blackmail form. If the guest follows through with the threat, dispute the review, referring back to the form.

6. Perform temperature checks

- Rather than wait until departure to ask how the guest's stay was, when it might be too late to fix problems, perform temperature checks during the stay. Ask open-ended questions like, "How is your stay going so far?" Be on alert for signs of trouble and follow up to ensure the guest doesn't walk out the door upset.
- By showing genuine concern and going the extra mile to turn around upset guests, you'll not only prevent negative reviews, you may even generate positive reviews. With expert handling, upset guests can become your greatest advocates. Make it your goal to change the story from "We had a problem" to "Staff did an amazing job resolving our problem and we'll definitely be back."

In summary, we reviewed some of the factors that are causing hotel guests to sometimes "behave badly", and then provided a quick summary of the necessary training that all front-line staff, as well as their supervisors should receive to de-escalate and manage conflict resolution effectively. If you are seeking a professional to conduct this training that can specifically address such hospitality related challenges with real-life examples, HPS would like to help.

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About Hospitality Performance Systems, Inc. (HPS)

Hospitality Performance Systems (HPS) was created to provide operational and sales support to the hospitality industry globally. Founded in 2009 this enterprise takes advantage of its founder and President, Stanton D Jacobs, CHA, with over 30 years of proven success in the hospitality industry and strategic relationships globally, HPS is affiliated with a wide array of professionals specializing in their respective disciplines, enabling HPS to provide a wide range of services. <https://www.hps-strategic.com> <https://www.linkedin.com/in/stantonjacobs/>