

Top 10 Customer Complaints

Handling Issues With Finesse BY KERRI FIVECOAT-CAMPBELL

No one likes getting customer complaints, but, let's face it, even the cleanest, best facilities will receive some customer complaints.

There are ways to handle customer complaints that will either make your facility look bad or make you the hero. "Disgruntled tenants who are not heard by the manager will tell anyone who will listen of their negative experience, including everyone on the internet," says Andrew Kelly, Jr., principal of Sierra Self Storage Consulting in Tucson, Ariz. "Excellent customer skills and training will help answer 95 percent of the normal tenant complaints."

Oftentimes, tenants who have complaints just want to be heard. "When someone wants to complain, just let them get it out," advises Anne Ballard, president of marketing, training, and developmental services for Universal Storage Group in Atlanta, Ga. "Listen professionally, and don't take it personally. Repeat it back to them in an effort to understand their complaint and take it from there."

Here are the top 10 tenant complaints (in no particular order), according to the experts, and tips on how to handle them:

1. You're raising my rent or discontinuing my move-in special:

This is most likely the top customer complaint, as every successful facility raises rents. "Raising the rent on existing customers is a necessity if you want to be your most profitable, but it can often evoke frustration and anger from tenants," says Chriss Michalopoulos, regional manager of the Pogoda Companies in Farmington Hills, Mich. Michalopoulos recommends training staff to point out the property's key features and benefits, as well as telling the customers they are still paying rent below the current street market rate (if this is true).

No one is immune to rising costs, so explaining to the tenant that costs have risen and evoking empathy by comparing their rising utility bills to the property is also a good strategy. Ballard says every tenant should receive a rate increase at least once a year, but she also tries to use some psychology on those who are receiving rate increases after an initial move-in savings. "Instead of a rate increase letter, send a savings reduction letter," says Ballard. "Don't send something saying their rate is increasing, send a letter saying, 'Your rate is now being reduced by five percent' with the new rate."

Of course, if you want to keep the customer, you can try to negotiate. "Managers should know the policy on concessions for good tenants," says James Hanrahan, managing partner of Store Here Self Storage in Orange, Calif. "Managers should have the latitude to negotiate."

However, if you don't want to keep the tenant or you know you can get another tenant at the market rate, simply explain your position. Kelly advises the following, "We offer a special move-in rate as an introduction to what our company offers in respect to excellent customer service, security, and curb appeal, to mention a few. I am sorry, but we can't afford to continuously offer below market rates." Kelly says if you do, in fact, provide all of the things mentioned, it should diffuse the complaint. "If the site's features and benefits have met the expectations of the tenant, the question of another special renewal is a rarity."

Ed Hainrihar, vice president of Compass Self Storage in Cleveland, Ohio, notes that this complaint can be headed off

before it's ever made. "Send out email updates or newsletters highlighting the features of your facility or improvements made," says Hainrihar. "It helps head off rental rate increases to come."

2. Poor lighting/security: "This is one the manager should take very seriously," says Ballard. "Tell them you take this very seriously. Don't over promise. You want to under promise and over deliver." Ballard suggests giving the owner suggestions on handling and taking action. If possible, put the call in while the tenant is there.

3. Complaints about staff: Kelly says to do all you can to keep a complaint from escalating, but to provide the name and number of a direct supervisor if you fail. "Ask them if they will allow you to help them first," says Kelly.

If a complaint makes it to the owner or management company, it likely isn't the manager's fault, but a company policy the tenant doesn't like. Hainrihar advises not to take it personally. "The tenant doesn't know you well enough to make it personal," he says.

4. Dumpster issues: Whether the complaint is that you don't have a dumpster for tenant use or the dumpster is locked, you can head this complaint off by fully explaining the dumpster policy during the initial lease signing. "Explain to them what they move in with they have to take when they leave," says Hainrihar.



"If you have a dumpster for use, but it's full, the manager or owner needs to make sure the property has the proper size."

5. Damage to contents: "No facility is immune from this type of complaint and it's just a matter of time before a site receives one," says Kelly, who advises making sure managers are trained to explain the lease at the time of rental and offering insurance or making sure a tenant initials or signs when refused. "Showing empathy and sympathy without admitting liability often solves the problem and shows the manager is a human and not a robot," says Kelly.

If damage was due to a leaky roof, the manager might offer to move the tenant to another unit and give a concession for a month.

Ballard advises that if the complaint has to do with rodents or bugs, explain the extermination policy/schedule and make sure the tenant knows you will be handling the situation.

6. Late fees: "The number one thing you can do is educate the customer during the lease presentation," says Michalopoulos. "Explaining when the rent is due at the beginning and the end of your lease presentation can go a long way."

Ballard offers a visual tip: Posting the date and time the rent is due by in the office. Also, make sure the manager is aware of the policy regarding late-fee waivers.

7. Possession disputes: No matter if the tenant says the dispute over possessions in the unit is due to a divorce, partner or business separation, or death, if they are not on the lease, says Kelly, you cannot allow them access unless they have a court order. Kelly advises to express sympathy but explain the law. "Tell them any personal issues are a civil court matter and you must get a court order to enter and remove any items," says Kelly. In the event of death, "Tell them you're sorry their family member

has passed away, but explain you will need to hear from the executor of the estate for the tenant or advise them to bring a small estate affidavit from the court."

8. No 24-hour access or gate code wouldn't work: If you don't provide 24-hour access, explain that to your tenants on the initial lease meeting. Hainrihar says to explain the policy is to ensure security. Also, make sure your gate is programmed so that tenants entering before closing can get out if they're leaving after closing, advises Hainrihar.

Gate code failure is typically the fault of the customer not knowing how to use it properly. Ballard advises posting signs giving clear instructions on how to use the gate at both the entrance and exit gates.

9. Auction fees: "Managers need to understand the lien laws governing their state allowing them to better communicate and inform their customers," says Michalopoulos. "Communication and documentation are key during this process both for you and the customer."

Ballard adds that it's very important to treat each customer equally in the auction process. "You should have the policy, if you don't pay, you don't stay," she says.

10. Website is not working/not accepting payments: It is very important that you have a well-functioning and easy-to-use website. "You have to have a good online payment portal," says Hainrihar. "Make it easy to use; make it easy to reset their password. But if they still don't want to pay online, give them other options, such as calling and paying by phone."

Following some of these simple tips might help you reduce your customer complaints. Keep in mind complaints also have at least one benefit: You can also see what you or your facility may not be getting quite right. It gives you an opportunity to fix an issue and be a better owner, manager, or facility. That means you can attract more tenants! 

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