Best Practices

Properly Managing Problem Situations

The National Association of Professional Pet Sitters is comprised of many wonderful, caring and compassionate individuals. Our members have committed themselves to providing a premium level of service to their customers and animal companions, and can be proud that they and their fellow members represent the best that the pet-care industry has to offer.

Unfortunately, there are occasions when even the best of intentions, preparation, and careful follow through result in a disappointed customer. These disappointments may be the result of simple human error, the lack of proper communication, or even circumstances out of your control. The way these situations are handled is a critical component in the success of your business.

Throughout the process of communicating with the customer about a problem situation remember that many minor mishaps are actually opportunities in disguise. Obviously we are striving for perfection in the performance of our pet-care responsibilities. Most people who engage your service, however, may hope for but do not necessarily expect perfection. They will judge you more for what you do after a mistake has been made than the mistake itself. A sincere effort at correcting the miscue, and making sure the same mistake is not repeated, are the main things that will result in keeping the confidence of most of your clients.

Treating the customer with kid gloves obviously becomes very important when you’ve lost a key, left a door unlocked, failed to follow explicit instructions, or even worse, missed a visit. It is equally important even when the mistake is not entirely your doing. Experienced service professionals know that the customer might sometimes miscommunicate something or otherwise contribute to whatever mistake occurs. This fact will be irrelevant to the majority of customers, and it will do you no good to argue over who should have done what. Educating the customer
on how to help you is better left until all other issues are resolved and you are 
explaining your procedure for preventing a reoccurrence.

Here are some steps you can take to try and keep an unfortunate incident 
from turning into a disaster. Your goal is to have the result of this incident be better 
relations with your customer, or at the very least, to allow the customer to leave 
your service with the knowledge that you are an honest and professional individual 
who simply made a mistake.

**Remove your ego from the situation**
Look at the situation as if it were another service involved, not yours. This may be 
difficult to do, but it is an essential first step in resolving most problems as it 
allows you to look at the situation objectively, and also sets the stage for the steps 
that follow.

**Ask for a face-to-face meeting if the problem is not a minor one**
This will demonstrate your commitment to customer satisfaction, and also gives 
both parties a chance at improved communication.

**Remain calm**
This can be difficult also, particularly if you are dealing with someone who 
becomes agitated, or even worse, aggressive or verbally abusive. Take a deep 
breath if this happens, and do not respond in kind. You, not they, will be the loser if 
you allow that to happen. If despite your attempts at keeping the situation calm the 
customer escalates their inappropriate behavior, politely let them know that 
although you have a sincere interest in professionally resolving the situation, 
continued similar behavior will result in your excusing yourself and leaving. If this 
step becomes necessary, calmly offer that they may call you to schedule another 
appointment after they have calmed down.

**Listen**
In order to solve the problem, you must understand the problem as the customer 
sees it. Do not interrupt other than to ask brief clarifying questions until you are 
certain the customer feels they have had an adequate opportunity to express 
themselves.

**Restate the problem**
When emotions escalate, communication deteriorates, and misunderstanding the 
customer’s main concern becomes possible. Say, “I understand that you are 
concerned about …” and name each item that they mentioned. Then follow up 
with, “I think your main concern is…” and deal with this first. Other concerns may 
well be minor, and possibly even disappear if you are able to satisfactorily resolve 
their main concern.
Say you’re sorry
Not just once, either. The customer wants to know you mean it. Begin and end with an apology, and try to fit one in somewhere in between too. Showing empathy while delivering the apology (explaining how you would feel if the roles were reversed) communicates that you understand the gravity of the situation. Again, do not make any reference to the problem being partly the result of someone else’s action.

Offer the key back, a refund, and to cover any expenses
Saying you’re sorry does no good if you don’t demonstrate that you mean it. Making sure your clients do not suffer monetarily for your mistake is a good way of demonstrating your sincere apology.

Be completely forthcoming with the information you provide
Sometimes you might be presented with a challenge in progress, a situation where the consequences of the mistake are still uncertain. If this is the case, do not withhold information in an effort to place yourself in a more favorable position. Holding information back will probably backfire. Give as much information as possible as soon as possible. Complete honesty, even to the point of volunteering information that points the blame in your direction, will reassure the customer that you are an honorable person—one they might do well to continue to do business with despite the current problem.

Explain what corrective action you are taking
If you don’t know yet how you will prevent the same mistake from occurring again, promise a return call or visit to provide these details. This is crucial in possibly retaining the customer. If you feel there is some way the customer contributed to the incident, this is the right time to ask for their help in taking specific actions that will help prevent a reoccurrence of the same problem.

Don’t forget to say you are sorry again
Open and honest communication is the key to favorably resolving customer concerns.