

Is it Okay to Dislike a Customer?

You can dislike up to three customers. Any more and the problem is you.

I have always loved every single one of my customers. Except one. Callen owned and operated a small machining company in Wisconsin. Initially, I liked him. A military veteran with a direct communication style, he ran a tight ship. One of the parts he machined for his customers required an outside operation that Callen's company couldn't do. Our company could, so he outsourced the operation to us. About six months into the relationship, I received a phone call inviting me to Callen's office to discuss a lead-time issue. As it turns out, one of our customer service people had committed to a delivery date and, due to an unexpected maintenance issue, we missed it. Not ideal, but it happens. Callen's reaction was over the top. For a good 10 minutes he berated me and our company. As his tirade culminated, he finished it off by saying, "If your customer service person ever lies to me again, I'm going to drive over to your plant, reach down his throat and rip out his lungs."

I saved him the trouble by firing him as a customer. I didn't like Callen very much.

I have always loved every single one of my customers, except a second one. Similar to Callen's company, Robert's company outsourced a finishing operation to our company.

Robert machined about 50 different SKUs for a major OEM, and the parts were very similar to one another, meaning that lot control was paramount. If an order was misidentified and the parts were labeled using the wrong part number, they could arrive at his customer's production line misidentified. In spite of

our efforts to the contrary, after processing our very first set of orders we were alerted by Robert that several of the parts had gotten mixed up when we ran them.

Fortunately, Robert's inspection team caught the error on their receiving dock. Disaster was averted, but I was apoplectic with our operations team for mixing the parts. They promised it wouldn't happen again. But it did—on the very next order. Robert was less understanding the second time around. We implemented a corrective action aimed at what we believed to be the root cause. It failed. And, on the third set of orders, the parts left our dock misidentified again. By now Robert was screaming at me over the phone and threatened to fire us as his supplier. He then proceeded to back charge us for the time his team spent straightening out the problem.

We assigned our quality manager the task of tracking the errors through our entire process. The parts in every

order were compared to the part print at our shipping dock, in our planning department, at the finishing line and at our receiving dock. We found the root cause of the problem—the parts

on our receiving dock were misidentified when they arrived from Robert's company. I called him to work out the issue and he insisted that it was impossible that the problem was on his end. The relationship continued for a month or so, with misidentified orders landing on our dock and our team straightening out his company's problem. Each time, Robert ignored reality and refused to acknowledge the problem, let alone attempt to fix it. He then moved the work to another supplier. I didn't like Robert very much.

I have always loved every single one of my customers. Except a third one. I was contacted by the procurement department of a large Midwestern manufacturer who requested that we provide a proposal on a huge project. The parts were being manufactured by a company located not far from the customer, and the procurement team had a hunch they were overpaying. If anything, the price we quoted was a little high, as the customer was on the outer edge of the geography we typically serviced, and supporting them would involve some travel cost. Our price was almost half the other company, and we won the job.

The procurement team was ecstatic; their operations team was not. The supplier that lost the job was owned by one of their former coworkers, and his friends at our customer's plant were not pleased. Thereafter, the operations team set out to make our experience in supporting them a living hell, instituting ridiculous expectations to which the previous supplier was never held, and then acting like the world was coming to an end if we missed them. It was clear that the goal of these people was to get us to give up the project so their buddy could have it back. Never mind that their friend had lined the project with so much margin that he was getting rich at the expense of their employer. I didn't like that customer very much.

I think the adage that "the customer is always right" is ridiculous. Experience demonstrates that often they are not. Nevertheless, the habit of disliking customers is a dangerous one as it can taint our desire to service them. For this reason, I have long contended that, as business people, we can dislike up to three customers at a time. Any more than that and the problem is probably us. ■■



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