

Making The Most Out Of Customer Complaints

A consistent and careful way of responding will burnish the image of your farrier business

By *Esco Buff, CF, PhD*

How you handle client complaints is every bit as important for your farrier business as providing great service in the first place.

Every business can expect complaints from clients. Farriers are no exception. I have seen farriers throw down their tools and verbally lambaste clients who voice a complaint or otherwise question their work. I've heard responses such as:

"If you can do this job better, do it yourself."

"Until you become a farrier, don't even think of questioning me."

"I've been shoeing for 30 years, so you have no right to question me."

Comments like these reflect on both the farrier and the farrier's business.

Count Your Blessings

A client complaint can actually be a blessing in disguise. For every person who complains, there are probably more who don't bother to complain to you, but may well be spreading negative comments about your service. When a client complains, deal with it directly and address the cause. That way, you are assuring the client that his or her problem has been heard and acted upon. Avoiding or blowing off a complaint jeopardizes repeat business, profits and puts your reputation at risk.

Instead of avoiding complaints or being

afraid of them, consider the advantages of hearing your clients' complaints. Consider each complaint as part of a feedback system that can help you learn, improve, develop better client relationships and enhance your footcare business.

Everyone has heard the oft-repeated slogan, "The customer is always right." But few realize the phrase was never intended to be taken literally. It was developed as a way of making customers feel special by teaching the staff to behave as if customers were right, even when they weren't. The idea you want to take away from that is that customers with complaints need to be treated with utmost respect and consideration.

Step-By-Step

So how should you deal with client complaints?

1. Put yourself in the client's shoes. Use empathy to help you see what he or she is trying to tell you. You need to try to understand how the client feels. The client may be wrong, but he or she also believes you have wronged him or her and/or the horse.

2. Listen, listen, listen. Give the client your full and undivided attention. Do not be defensive or stubborn. Don't start thinking about how you will respond as soon as a client starts a complaint. Do that and you aren't listening any more. On occasion, a complaining client may be rude, angry and vulgar. Remain



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calm, level headed and professional. Concentrate on what is being said. Leave your emotions behind. Control your anger.

3. Repeat the problem back to the client in a calm, non-judgmental tone, after the client is done venting and complaining. "What I hear you saying is that I trimmed the horse in a manner that has made him lame." By repeating the complaint, you demonstrate to the client that you heard and understood him or her. Listen again if something needs to be clarified. Do not justify your actions or become defensive. Clients don't want excuses, they want solutions. Ask questions to make sure you fully understand the problem. Remember, just being heard will make unhappy clients feel better.

4. Apologize for any inconvenience you may have caused — even if you did nothing wrong. Show concern. "I'm sorry your horse was lame after I trimmed him." Don't apologize for causing the lameness (which may be construed as an acceptance of guilt) but do acknowledge the lameness.

5. Find a solution or make it right. "What can I do to make this right for you? Let me look at your horse closer and determine what I can do differently next time." If you have actually recognized an error in your performance or service, this is the time to own up to it. Even if you believe you did nothing wrong, you'll find that most complaints are resolved just by acknowledging the complaint and asking for a solution.

"I don't want my horse lame after you trim him again." Your response to this

should be on the lines of, "I certainly understand and although I do not understand why this happened, I will pay closer attention to my trimming in order to make sure this is not the cause of any future lameness issues."

6. Thank the client for bringing the complaint to you. This lets the client know you care about them, as well as your

business. Dealing with client complaints calmly and with respect will reduce negative feedback about your business.

Using this method can restore the client's faith in you. In what is known as a "recovery paradox," clients can actually be more delighted by a skillful service complaint resolution than they are by a service that was complaint free.

The flip side to this is that many clients actually have more tolerance for poor service than they do for poor resolution of complaints. You can lose a client forever if you do not handle complaints in a courteous and professional manner.

The Real Problems

There are several types of complaining clients who will need to have their complaints handled carefully and effectively.

The Chronic Complainer is never satisfied with you or your work. There is always something wrong. But he or she keeps you as their shoer — which can be more frustrating than being fired. Extraordinary patience is required when dealing with this type of client. Listen carefully and completely. Don't get angry.

The Rip-Off Complainer is not really interested in getting the complaint resolved. He or she is more concerned with getting a discount or money back. Don't give away service and don't discount your work. These clients won't really be happy until you pay them to be allowed to shoe their horses. Do your best to satisfy their complaints, but your resolution may be to have them seek out another farrier.

The Aggressive Complainer is loud, often vulgar and can be physically intimidating. Be careful with this type. Listen completely. Keep asking, "What else?" Agree that a problem exists and indicate what will be done to resolve it. Do not make excuses or list reasons why your service failed. If you feel threatened, leave and telephone or write to them instructing them to find another farrier.

The Meek Client does not complain — even when unhappy. Potentially, this can be as big a problem as any of the others, especially if he or she starts sharing complaints with other clients or potential clients instead of with you. With this kind of client, make sure you solicit feedback to make sure there are no complaints.

If you have a question you'd like answered in this column, e-mail it to ptearney@lesspub.com with Hoof-Care Bottom Line in the subject line, or mail it to American Farriers Journal, P.O. Box 624, Brookfield WI 53008-0624. 📧

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