



# De-escalating Upset & Angry Customers

Retail <sup>NZ</sup>

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# De-escalating Upset and Angry Customers

This short training session is designed to give retail staff some quick skills and tools to manage angry or upset customers quickly, professionally and safely.

No matter how hard you try, you are never going to be able to please everyone who comes through your door all of the time. The main thing to remember is that sometimes it has nothing to do with you. It may be that someone is not feeling well on a particular day, or they may have received bad news, or it may be that someone or something else has upset them and you just happen to be in the firing line.

Now that is not fair, and it's never acceptable, but sadly it is inevitable that it will happen to you at some point in your retail career. So, it is best to know how to manage it in such a way that you and the customer emerge unscathed and preferably the better for it at the other end.

## The Retailer's Role and Purpose

A good place to start is to take a moment and have a bit of a think about what your purpose as a retailer really is. If you could sum up in one succinct sentence the purpose of your job, what would it be?

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Ask yourself this question, "What problem am I trying to solve for my customer?"

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Think of yourself as someone with whom your customers can consult about solving their specific problem.

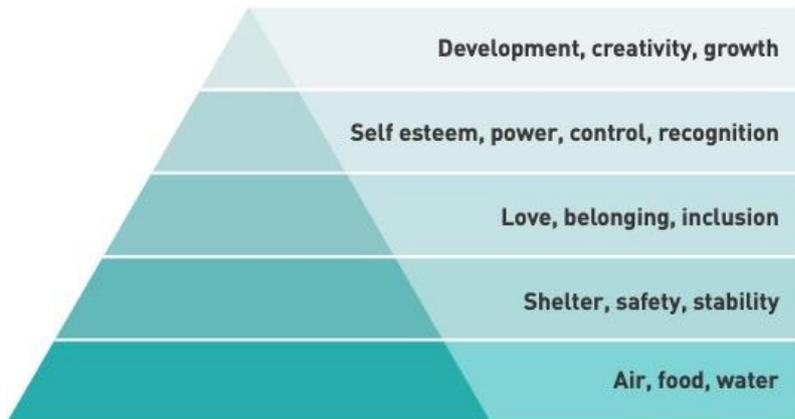
**Retailer is a consultant who helps people find workable solutions to everyday challenges!**

## Understanding Unmet Needs

So, how does this help you to de-escalate an angry person?

- People become upset or angry because they have a *need* that is not being met or a problem that they are struggling to solve.
- Part of the de-escalation process is to help them get what they need.

This diagram shows Maslow's hierarchy of needs:



Now consider the environment in which you work, when a customer becomes angry or upset at which of these levels is it likely that a need is not being met for the customer?

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So, what is going on for someone who is upset?

- When needs are not met, on a subconscious level it can feel like we are facing a threat which can feel unsafe. (This could be perceived as a threat to survival or wellbeing in some way).
- When we come under threat our rational brain turns off and our primitive brain (also known as our reptile brain) whose only concern is survival - takes over.
- It gets the body ready for “fight or flight” and a cocktail of chemicals is released into the bloodstream to prepare it for action. (Mostly cortisol and adrenaline). Our cognition, logic and ability to reason is significantly dulled when this happens. It is this process that can make an angry person seem difficult or unreasonable.



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# How to De-Escalate Anyone

## Ground rules for calming a crocodile

1. Understand that your angry customer is in survival mode (reptile brain is switched on) - they are incapable of rational thought right at this moment.
2. Don't try to reason or argue with a crocodile or tell them that they are wrong - it's impossible - they are incapable of hearing you - refer to rule 1. Beware of being bitten!
3. Remain **calm and professional** at all times! No matter how toxic someone becomes, don't take it personally - this can be a tough one, but your survival depends on it!
4. Show understanding, empathy and kindness - we've all been in that state at some point or another in our lives.
5. Show that you care by communicating that you are doing your very best to find a workable solution.

**Remember that you are a consultant who helps people find solutions to everyday challenges!**

## Past, Present, Future De-escalation Tool

**Past/Present/Future** is a really easy to remember, 3 step de-escalation Tool that if used correctly works really well in difficult interactions with upset or angry customers.

### 1. Past

- Invite the person to tell their story - to tell you what has happened or what is going on for them.  
*e.g. "How can I help sir, what has happened?"*
- Listen! Really listen without judgement and make good eye-contact and watch your body language (What is it communicating? - it is a language after all)
- Do your very best to try and understand the issue from **their perspective** (this is not about you)
- Don't listen to respond - just listen to hear and understand.
- **Acknowledge** what they have said - whether they are right or wrong doesn't really matter. You want to communicate that you have heard them.
- **Just being heard and acknowledged will start the de-escalation process.** Don't underestimate the importance of listening and acknowledging what you have heard.

**For example** - you might say *"I can most definitely see how such a long wait would be challenging or distressing for you when you have so much to do..."*

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## 2. Present

- Whether we want to admit it or not, we are all driven by feelings/emotions. (It is our response to our feelings that switch on the reptile brain). So, while it would be inappropriate in this situation to ask the customer about how they might be feeling, you could have a **guess**.

**For example** - you could say *“I can only imagine how frustrated you must feel by this by this, so many people are feeling this way right now.”*

(They will tell you whether you are right or wrong in your assumption. Either way, the fact that you show some level of understanding and empathy will work in your favour - even if your guess is off, just talking with them is likely to alleviate some of their pressure or anxiety.)

- What this kind of language/dialogue does is - it **validates and normalises** how the person feels.
- The importance of this is that it communicates:
  - a. That you are on their side
  - b. That they are not alone or going crazy (other people are feeling the same way too)
  - c. It can alleviate embarrassment for your customer
  - d. It **de-escalates**.

**Apologise** - even if it's not your fault or if out of your control. This can often invoke empathy for your situation from the customer. Ask yourself if you would rather be right or be happy.

Also, thank them for bringing their concern to your attention - sometimes complaints can be a great tool for us to learn and improve what we are doing - so express your thanks. They will appreciate that you have done so as it also gives validity to their situation.

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## 3. Future

- As we've said before - If you are in retail - you are all about solving problems for people. So, here's where you get to shine - what is the solution, can you find one?
  - a. This may be an older or vulnerable person standing out in the cold for example, can you bump them up the queue? (**Warning!** - If you do this - be very sure to **communicate** your reasons for doing this to others who are waiting - failing to do so could cause a riot).
  - b. If for example you've learnt that the customer is running late for a doctor's appointment, can you take their details and help them to place their order the same as you would for someone who rang through a phone order or an online order?
  - c. Don't be afraid to ask the customer what would be most helpful for them right now. They could have an easily implemental solution.
  - d. Try to think outside the box and be as flexible and as helpful as possible.

And even if you can't find a workable solution - don't worry, just showing some empathy and listening will help in the de-escalation process.

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Lastly - don't take anything personally - crocodiles aren't known for their interpersonal skills, but you are, so remain calm, polite, engaged and professional, and above all show that you care by being empathetic.

## Self-care and Resilience

**If confrontation and conflict are not your thing, then facing an angry person will be difficult for you.**

However, these are excellent life-skills that can be applied in any career or any other situation you may find yourself in.

That being said, it is very natural to feel rattled or upset after such an interaction - especially if it has not turned out for the best. Just remember - you can't win 'em all! So, it is not a failure if you have not been successful in your de-escalation attempt.

It is however vital that you take a few minutes out after such an interaction. Take a short walk, get a warm drink, and talk it through with your manager or a trusted and supportive colleague. Strong reactions in others can trigger strong reactions in us. You may have felt scared or unsafe during the interaction.

***This is a normal response to an abnormal circumstance.***

So, see it for what it is, and make sure that your needs are also being met. Refer to earlier diagram which shows Maslow's hierarchy of needs and you will see that your needs are likely to have been compromised during the interaction as well. Depending on how upset or angry the person was, you may have perceived a threat to your own safety, sense of belonging, lack of power or control. It is normal to feel this way when we are treated unfairly, disrespectfully or with contempt, or if we feel that we have been threatened in some way. So, you do well to take a little time out and speak to someone so that you can also recover from your "reptile brain state" and regain a sense of safety, control and normality.

This includes looking after your immediate physical needs, getting something to eat and drink and getting a short rest period or exercise and some fresh air. Be in tune to what would normally make you feel good. Is it listening to music, speaking to a loved one etc.?

One good thing about such difficult interactions is that they build resilience in us. Resilience is our ability to bounce back after a challenge, and it develops our toughness to such situations should we have to face them again someday. It boosts our self-confidence and brings an inner strength and knowledge that we do have the ability and the inner resources to face these situations again should we need to in the future.

**It's life experience and it's priceless.**

## In summary

This is what you need to remember:



One last point - always be assessing the situation for physical danger. If a customer is showing signs of becoming physically violent, you should not hesitate to call 111.

## In conclusion

Congratulations, you have successfully completed this online training module. To really be skilled and successful in using this tool, it is best to role play with a manager or team-mate.

You can email any questions to [Natalie.frauenstein@retail.kiwi](mailto:Natalie.frauenstein@retail.kiwi) or if you wish to discuss any of the material in person, please call 021 377 011.

For general enquiry about our service or about a particular retail matter, please call our Advice Service on 0800 472 472 or email [advice@retail.kiwi](mailto:advice@retail.kiwi).

**Thank you and happy retailing!**

# Role Play Scenarios

Here are some role-play scenarios for you to work through with your colleagues.

Look at each of the situations below. How can you de-escalate each of these? You may even want to re-enact some real ones that have happened to you and your team.

Remember, these are just role-plays, so make up some details as you go along, pull out your best acting skills and really have some fun with it. Make the environment a safe one where people can make mistakes but where everyone can learn from them. Most importantly remind one another to use the skills you have just learnt in this module. (The Summary diagram should give you the prompts you need).

## Scenarios:

1. A customer is threatening expose your business to the media for breaching the Fair Trading Act.
2. A customer is angry because they have bought a product from your store, and they say that the salesperson misled them regarding the quality and lifespan of the product. They feel they have been cheated by you and can never trust your business again. They are raising their voice and shouting.
3. A colleague has accidentally deleted your entire database, including personal customer information. One customer is really unhappy about this and is refusing to give you their information again. They fear their privacy has been breached.
4. Someone wants a refund but it's unwarranted - they have wilfully damaged the product. They're trying to bully you into giving them their money back for no real cause.
5. A customer has been waiting in line outside your store for a long time because of social distancing and is becoming very irate. They are raising their voice and upsetting other customers.

**Look out for your colleagues, and if they have had a difficult interaction with an angry or difficult customer, encourage them to do some self-care. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that the workplace is a safe and happy one for everyone who works there.**