

Dealing with Angry Customers When You're Short Staffed

The scene is a common one these days. Lines of people waiting to pay in a restaurant, retail establishment, or grocery store. Tempers flare. Customers yell at staff and wonder why there's only one person checking people out. Your staff thinks, "Who needs this?" and they're not wrong. They feel overworked and underappreciated. Customers are demanding and loud. Customers vow not to return. It makes for a bad situation for everyone.

So what can you do to ensure it doesn't happen in your business?

Dealing with angry people during a staffing shortage is not easy, especially since one problem creates the other. People are angry because they have to wait. People have to wait because you are short staffed. No one wants to work in an environment filled with angry people.

Here are some things you can do to diffuse the situation.

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Put People Where They're Needed

As a manager or owner, when you are short-staffed you will always be assessing what needs to be done and who is around to do it. **Make sure you have people in the most critical customer-facing spots and pull them from other areas as needed, even if only for a few minutes.**

Ensure your employees feel empowered to help one another with overflow. If they are on rack duty, for instance, in your retail establishment make sure they know you appreciate them helping out at the cash register when a line forms. This means you will need to take the time to **cross-train everyone** and make sure they are comfortable working in all areas of the store/business where appropriate.

Stress That Everyone's a Manager

Often when people are disgruntled, they will demand to see a manager. While there are some decisions that only a manager can make, **help your employees feel confident enough to take the reins in these situations and insist that they are decision makers.** They can reiterate that the manager issued the protocols they are following.

When they call you every time a manager is needed, the customer quickly learns the person they are dealing with is a low person on the staff chart and no longer feels the need to listen to them. You are also rewarding bad behavior done against your staff.

Achieving this level of confidence in your employees means you have trained them to make decisions and they know what freedoms they have to assist your customers. Help them understand what rules may be broken or stretched and which ones are absolutes.

Explain the Situation

While you never want to apologize for something that hasn't happened yet, it is a good idea to remind everyone that you are doing your best. In fact, you may even want to add a "be kind message" to your help wanted posters. Explain that if they want things to be processed quicker, you would love additional help. Using a little humor can go a long way to diffuse difficult situations.

Play Good Music

If you have the right staff and it fits your business, **try playing some good tunes**; the type of music that gets people moving. Encourage your staff to sing or invite others to burst out into song or dance. This may sound goofy but it's hard to be in a bad mood when the song "Walking on Sunshine" comes on the radio.

Soothe Them with Voice

The human voice can affect mood. A whiny voice can put customers on edge while a loud voice can make them feel more combative. With a confident, soothing voice you can make people feel understood and less prone to anger.

This hiring crisis is a challenging time for managers, staff, and owners. Just when everyone wants to get out and enjoy life again, their favorite businesses are struggling to hire. Some have had to shut down because they don't have enough employees to operate. These tips will help you calm tempers until things can return to normal employment.

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