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A 10-step plan for dealing with angry real estate clients

Asking the right questions can help defuse the situation

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[Woman with fire extinguisher](#) image via Shutterstock.

Has one of your best clients suddenly become angry without any seeming provocation? While you may not always be able to uncover the reason for the situation, the "symptom, source, solution" provides a powerful model for finding an acceptable outcome for this difficult situation.

When a client confronts you, how do you handle the situation? Do you up the ante and escalate the situation? If you made a mistake, do you try to rationalize why it's not your fault? Neither of these "solutions" works very well. The question is, what does work?

The "symptom, source, solution" model can help you spot the real issues that underlie difficult or angry situations as well as providing a framework for successfully resolving the issue as well.

Symptom

The first step in applying the "symptom, source, solution" model is to understand the distinction between what is causing the situation (the "source") vs. how the issue shows up (the "symptom").

For example, your buyers discover that the house they have under contract is going to need a new roof. They become angry at the sellers for not disclosing the roof issue on the listing agreement and angry at you for not knowing that those brown stains on the ceiling (that you did note on the disclosure agreement) could mean that they might have to replace the roof.

Source

In the example above, the anger is the symptom. What's interesting is that the source of almost every difficulty in the real estate business is fear. In this case, the fear could be that the buyers will be unable to purchase the house because they cannot afford the extra money for the roof repair. An additional fear may be that if they back out, they may not find something they like as well. Yet another fear may be, "If the sellers didn't reveal the roof leak problem, what else are they concealing?"

Before you can move toward a solution, you must uncover the true source. Here is a 10-step model that can help you cope with virtually any angry situation and that will quickly move you to solution mode.

1. Defuse the situation by first letting go of any need you may have to be right or to win.
2. If a client yells at you, do a "pattern interrupt." This technique comes from neurolinguistic programming (NLP). The strategy is to stop the angry behavior (the symptom) as quickly as possible.

For example, if you just presented a very low offer to your seller and she became upset, a "[pattern interrupt](#)" could be asking her to get a glass of water for you.

Standing up actually changes her mood.

Another example of a "pattern interrupt" would be to ask the seller to pause for a moment while you obtain a pen and paper to write down what she is saying.

3. To protect yourself from litigation, take careful notes. After doing the "pattern interrupt," ask the angry individual to repeat what she just said so that you can write it

down. Making the individual go back through what she has already covered usually reduces the anger.

4. Now ask your client to pause. Read back what your client just said in the calmest and most soothing voice possible. This is called "charge neutral." By repeating what your client said in "charge neutral," you are defusing the situation by taking the emotion out of what the client said. This approach makes it easier to get at the source of the issue.

5. Ask the individual if you correctly wrote down her concerns. Then ask if there is anything else. Stay with the anger until the person has said everything she needed to say. By digging for her concerns, you can usually uncover the real source of the issue. Continue to repeat back what she says in charge neutral.

6. If the anger is directed at you, respond with: "It was never my intention to make you angry. What can I do to correct the problem?"

Notice there is no acceptance or blame, only an effort on the part of the agent to take steps to correct something that has gone wrong. This question lets you move to the solution.

7. If your client is still extremely angry with you, offer to set up a meeting with your broker/owner/manager.

8. If the anger is directed at another individual, don't criticize the other party. Instead, ask, "What can I do to be of assistance in solving this problem?"

9. If you made a mistake don't give excuses or say, "I'm sorry." "I'm sorry" requires an explanation. Instead, say, "Forgive me, I made a mistake. What can I do to fix the situation?" This puts the power in the hands of the other individual without excuses or rationalizations. Also, it demonstrates that you are willing to take responsibility for your actions.

10. When the customer/client is unjustifiably angry, don't argue with her or try to prove your point. If you can't honestly say, "I understand your point of view," at least write down the client's concerns and read them back to make sure you have captured them correctly. In most cases, the situation will calm down when someone has taken the time to listen and record their concerns.

Remember, the source of virtually all problems in your real estate transaction is fear. The easiest way to move from anger (the symptom) and past the fear (the source) is by following the simple steps outlined above.

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