

STEPS FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS

by Patty Wells

No matter what area of a convention you work you are likely to hear complaints. If you're working in Art Show, Dealer's Room, Registration, Hospitality, Office or Program it's pretty well guaranteed that you will hear complaints. It's not easy to field complaints, especially when they hit when you are under much stress. Use any of the suggestions below. Don't expect yourself to do everything perfectly all the time. Work on the "practice makes better" rule. And remember, you've won half the battle if you not take a complaint personally.

If complaints are a given, how do you best handle them? A good start is to examine how you sound. A good public speaking tip is to slow down the speed with which you're talking. People tend to pace each other in conversation. Your setting a calm, deliberate tone will often help defuse the person complaining. Pitching your voice lower can help do the same thing. Appear as pleasant and in control as you can. Make eye contact. All this prepares you to actually deal with the complaint. Try the following steps:

1. Express respect, e.g., "Thank you for telling me this, we need to be aware of this problem."
2. Listen to the person complaining. It may be the twentieth time you've heard the same problem, or it may actually be something new and critical. An easy example is, "Tell me what happened."
3. What are the person's expectations, e.g., "what do you think needs to happen?"
4. Repeat what they've said for clarity, e.g., "Let me be sure that I understand what happened". This is also important because people are often upset or angry when they complain. They aren't always communicating clearly.
5. Outline the alternatives or a solution, e.g., "I will do this" or "You have some alternatives..." Make sure they understand the alternatives if they are angry or upset.
6. Take action, or see that it is taken, e.g., "I will personally check on that" or "I will make sure that registration handles this."
7. Follow up to see if the matter is concluded, e.g., "Was your experience in childcare better today?"

It is not always easy to do this under the pressure of a long registration line. Sometimes the solution is to find someone else who has the time to talk or to have the person return later. The bottom line is that the person complaining usually won't go away until you deal with their complaint. Figuring out the least confrontational, most expedient way to do it will generally be easier on everyone involved.

There are some special circumstances:

The person who won't take no for an answer. The really pushy complainer is best handled by two things; the first is taking it as a personal challenge to keep your cool. This person wants you to get flustered since they believe it will help them get their way. The second is to remain firm on the alternatives you can offer e.g., "At this point, we can put your artwork in this space, or we can not hang it at all. If they persist I suggest this approach, "It sounds as if you want me to (fill in the blank), and I've already explained that we won't do that." At that point you can review their alternatives and ask which they want to take.

The indecisive person: this one will drive you crazy when you are most busy. They usually want you to decide for them. To speed them up line out the alternatives as clearly as possible. Not giving them too many alternatives from which to choose also helps.