

~~DIS~~ GRUNTLED to GRUNTLED

*Five Steps for Turning Angry
Customers into Loyal Ones*

(Yes, gruntled is a real word.)

KEVIN HOOGEVEEN

INTRODUCTION

Why “Gruntled” Is a Real Word, and Why Nobody Uses It

Let’s get the vocabulary out of the way first.

Gruntled is a real word. Look it up. It means pleased, satisfied, content. It has been in the dictionary for a long time, and almost nobody uses it, because almost nobody has any use for it. We have an entire industry built around the disgruntled customer: the hold music, the phone trees, the surveys that arrive four minutes after the call that made you want to throw your phone into a lake. We do not have an industry built around the gruntled customer. We barely have a word for them.

That tells you something about where most companies put their energy. They spend it managing anger, deflecting anger, routing anger to a department that is closed on weekends. Very few spend it on the part that matters, which is getting a person from angry back to satisfied, on purpose, in a way you can repeat.

That’s what this book is about. It is about turning a complaint into the beginning of a relationship instead of the end of one. Tension into trust. Conflict into commitment. Disgruntled into gruntled.

And no, most companies do not have a clue how to do it. Not because they're evil. Because nobody ever showed them, and the metrics they're measured on actively reward doing it wrong.

Why This Matters More Than It Used To

I'm going to resist the urge to tell you the world has never been more frustrated. Every generation says that, and every generation has been at least a little bit right. My generation grew up with rotary phones, Blockbuster late fees, and a customer service model that consisted of a teenager shrugging at you. We survived. So did the companies.

What has changed is not the amount of frustration. It's the volume knob.

The National Customer Rage Survey, which Arizona State University's Center for Services Leadership runs with Customer Care Measurement & Consulting as a direct descendant of a study the White House commissioned back in 1976, is the closest thing we have to a longterm thermometer for how Americans feel about being customers. The most recent edition, released in December 2025, found that 77 percent of U.S. consumers had a product or service problem in the previous twelve months. Of those, 64 percent said they felt *rage* about it. Half of them raised their voice at somebody. Forty-three percent said the company never responded at all. And a quarter of the people who complained about a serious problem took it to social media.¹

Read those numbers as a business owner and they should bother you. Read them as a customer and you're probably nodding. Then read them together and you notice the real problem: the two groups are the same people. Every one of your customers has been on the other end of a bad phone call this year. They know what "your call is important to us" means. They have already decided, before your rep picks up, that this is going to be a fight.

That's the world you're operating in. Complaints are not rare events anymore. They're a Tuesday.

But the same research has a second half that most people skip. When a company handles a complaint well, the customer who complained ends up *more* loyal than the customers who never had a problem in the

first place. When it handles the complaint badly, that customer's loyalty drops well below the people who never complained at all.² The complaint itself is neutral. It's a fork in the road. What you do next decides which way the customer goes.

The companies that win the next decade will not be the ones that avoid complaints. Nobody avoids complaints. They'll be the ones that know exactly what to do with one.

The Root of the Problem: A Broken Trust Loop

Every complaint is a broken promise.

Whether you said it out loud or not, the customer believed something would happen, and it didn't. The package would arrive Thursday. The technician would show up between eight and noon. The bill would match the quote. The website would work. Researchers who study satisfaction call this the expectation-disconfirmation model, which is a fancy way of saying people compare what they got to what they expected, and they feel the gap.³ The gap is the complaint.

Sometimes you actually failed. Often you didn't; the expectation was set by your marketing, or by their last experience with a competitor, or by a well-meaning salesperson who promised something the operations team never heard about. It doesn't matter. In the customer's eyes, a promise was made and a promise was broken. That is a betrayal, and betrayal produces emotion: anger, frustration, confusion, or the quiet kind, where they say nothing at all and simply never come back.

The quiet kind is the one that should scare you most. John Goodman, who ran the research firm behind those original White House studies, spent decades measuring how many unhappy customers actually bother to complain. His answer, in round numbers, is that the complaints you hear are the tip of an iceberg. For every person who calls, there's a crowd who didn't.⁴ They just left.

Which means every complaint you *do* receive is a gift. It's a customer who still cares enough to give you one more chance. This book is about not blowing it.

My Story: From Apologies to Action

I didn't learn any of this in a seminar. I learned it over a working life that looks, on a résumé, like four unrelated jobs and was, in practice, one long conversation with people who were upset with me.

I started at an attorney service and courier company, where the customers were law firms and the product was a deadline. When a filing has to be stamped by the clerk at 4:30, it's 4:15, and the driver is stuck on the expressway, nobody at the firm wants to hear about traffic. They want to hear that you have a plan. I worked at a big box home improvement store, where I learned that the man standing at the returns desk with a broken faucet, no receipt, and a wet basement is not really angry about the faucet. I moved into title insurance and escrow operations, where the closing table is the place trust goes to die, because every dollar a person has is sitting on it and a two-hour delay feels like theft. And I ran mortgage operations, where a rate lock expiring because someone's file sat on the wrong desk is, to the borrower, the difference between a house and no house.

Different industries. Same phone call. Angry emails. Aggressive voicemails. Demands for refunds. Threats of lawsuits, which are a lot more credible when your customers *are* lawyers. You name it, I've heard it, usually before lunch.

At first I did what everyone does, because it's what everyone is trained to do. I defended the policy. I explained what *should* have happened. I offered discounts and fee waivers to buy forgiveness, which is the customer service equivalent of a guy bringing gas station flowers to an argument.

It never worked. It only escalated. The more I explained, the angrier they got, and I couldn't figure out why, because everything I was saying was *true*.

The turning point came when I finally understood something that seems obvious in hindsight: customers don't want to be right. They want to be heard, valued, and restored. Being right is a consolation prize. Nobody hangs up a call thinking, "Well, I didn't get my refund, but I really nailed that argument."

So I changed my approach. I stopped defending. I started listening, actually listening, not the kind where you're waiting for your turn. I repeated their words back to them. I owned the issue, even when it wasn't mine to own. I made promises with times attached. And then I did the part that turned out to be rarest of all: I kept them.

The results were not subtle. Customers who started the call yelling were ending it with thank-yous. Some became loyal advocates. One of them told me, "This is the first time I've ever complained and felt better afterward," which is either a compliment to me or an indictment of every other company he'd ever called. Probably both.

That became my mission: to turn complaints into loyalty, and eventually to teach other people how. This book is the teaching part.

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

Let's talk about what actually happens when a company mishandles a complaint, because the real cost is not what shows up on the P&L.

The real cost isn't the refund. It isn't the return shipping. It isn't even the lost sale. The real cost is the lost relationship, and the influence that walks out the door with it.

The old rule of thumb, from the same line of research that produced the Rage Survey, is that an unhappy customer tells nine or ten people about the experience.⁵ That number was measured in the 1980s, when telling ten people required actually talking to ten people. Now the same customer tells ten people in a group text and four thousand strangers on whatever platform is popular this week. A screenshot of your chatbot saying something stupid can circulate for a year. It costs the customer nothing, and it costs you more than a bad quarter.

There's a reason negative experiences travel farther than positive ones, and it isn't that people are jerks. Psychologists have documented, across an almost comical range of situations, that bad events hit harder and stick longer than good ones of the same size. They call it "bad is stronger than good," which is an unusually plain title for an academic paper.⁶ One bad interaction outweighs several good ones. You don't get to average your way out of it.

The customer service research says the same thing from a different angle. In a survey of more than 75,000 customers, one research team found that people who'd just had a service interaction were four times more likely to walk away *less* loyal than more loyal.⁷ The default outcome of a service call is damage. You have to work to make it otherwise.

And here's the part that should make every executive uncomfortable: in that same study, 89 percent of customer service leaders said their strategy was to *exceed* customer expectations. Meanwhile, 84 percent of customers said their expectations were not exceeded. That's not a gap. That's two different planets.

There is good news buried in all this. The 2020 Rage Survey looked at what customers actually got when they complained and how satisfied they were with it. Monetary relief alone, a refund or a credit, produced satisfaction 43 percent of the time. Non-monetary remedies alone, meaning an apology, an explanation, or an assurance it wouldn't happen again, did *better*: 50 percent. Both together, 60 percent.⁸ The free stuff that companies reach for first is less effective than the free stuff that costs nothing. A decade earlier, the same survey found that 90 percent of complainers said they just wanted to be treated with dignity. Forty percent said they got it.⁹

Think about that. The thing customers want most is the thing that costs you least, and you're only delivering it four times out of ten.

The upside of fixing this is not small, either. The classic finding, published in 1990 by Bain's Frederick Reichheld and Harvard's Earl Sasser, is that raising customer retention by five percent can increase profits by anywhere from 25 to 85 percent, depending on the industry.¹⁰ Your existing customers are the cheapest customers you will ever have. The complaint is your last chance to keep one.

The biggest myth in business is that complaints are bad. Complaints are feedback with a pulse. Every angry email is a chance to rewrite the story. Every frustrated phone call is a door cracked open, and you get to decide whether to walk through it or slam it.

Why Most Businesses Get This Wrong

It isn't because they don't care. Most of the people I've worked with in customer service care a great deal. It's because they don't know how to care in a way the customer can actually *feel*, and because the systems around them were built by people who never worked a phone.

Instead, most companies default to policy over people, defense over listening, excuses over empathy, and automation over anything resembling a human being. They train reps to *survive* complaints instead of solving them. They script apologies but never teach accountability. They outline procedures but never coach presence. They measure how fast a ticket closed and never whether the customer would come back.

Researchers who study complaint handling have looked at what actually predicts loyalty afterward, and they keep finding the same two things. You need the *mechanistic* stuff, meaning clear guidelines, defined processes, and someone who's allowed to make a decision. And you need the *organic* stuff, meaning a culture where the people on the phone are expected, and empowered, to act like humans.¹¹ Companies tend to invest in one and starve the other. The procedure manual is three hundred pages and the rep isn't allowed to issue a twenty-dollar credit without a manager.

Your process is only as strong as your people, and your people can only deliver what they're trained and permitted to do. That's not a slogan. It's the finding.

The Emotional Journey of a Customer

Before we get to the five steps, let's look at what's actually happening under the surface when somebody complains, because if you understand the sequence, the steps stop feeling like a script and start feeling like common sense.

1. **They feel let down.** A gap has opened between what they expected and what they got. This is the moment the promise broke.
2. **They feel powerless.** They don't know whether they'll get help or just more of the same. They've been here before, with somebody else, and it went badly.

3. **They feel the need to act.** Anger gives them a sense of agency. Venting is the only power they have right now, so they use it.
4. **They want resolution, with dignity.** They want the problem fixed, but they do not want to beg for it. Begging is its own injury.
5. **They want to trust you again.** Not just to have the issue closed, but to feel that the next time won't be a disaster. Restore that, and you don't just fix a problem. You keep a customer.

The five steps in this book map onto those five stages, in order. That's not a coincidence.

Why “Gruntled” Matters

Nobody uses the word. That's why I picked it.

We spend a lot of time on the loud customers, the angry ones, the influencers with a grievance and a ring light. We spend almost no time on the customer who had a problem, called, and hung up *pleasantly surprised*. The one who felt heard, felt valued, and stayed loyal, not because you bribed them, but because you treated them like a human being who'd had a bad day.

That's a gruntled customer. They tell the story at dinner. They leave the review you didn't ask for. They are the best marketing you will ever get, and you can't buy them. You can only earn them, one honest interaction at a time.

The Five Steps

Here's the framework the rest of the book unpacks:

1. **Listen.** Let them vent. Don't interrupt. They cannot feel better until they feel heard.
2. **Repeat the complaint.** Reflect their words back. Prove you understood the problem, the emotion, and the impact.
3. **Take responsibility.** Own the issue and the solution, even if you didn't cause it.
4. **Make a promise.** Rebuild trust with a specific commitment and a clear time frame.
5. **Keep the promise.** Do what you said you'd do, when you said you'd do it. This is where trust is actually rebuilt.

Each chapter takes one step. Each opens with a real moment from the front lines, good or bad. Each breaks down the psychology of what's happening, backed by actual research rather than a motivational poster. Each shows you how to respond, gives you a short playbook your team can use tomorrow, and ends with questions to ask yourself and your organization.

Whether you run the company or work the counter part-time, you'll find things here you can use today.

Why This Book Is Different

This isn't a corporate training manual. It's not a lecture on empathy and it's not a binder of scripts that sound like they were written by a committee that has never been yelled at.

It's a field-tested blueprint for turning tense customer moments into the moments people remember you for. You'll learn how to disarm anger, rebuild trust, and win back even the customers who've already written you off, not through manipulation, but through competence. The research is in here because I got tired of reading business books that made things up. Every study cited in these pages is real, and the notes at the back tell you where to find it.

By the end you won't just have a new set of skills. You'll have a different way of seeing a complaint: not as a burden, but as the single best opportunity your business gets to prove what it's made of.

Let's Start

Before we dig in, one question.

What would change in your business if you stopped fearing complaints and started treating them as the most valuable feedback you'll ever get? What if every angry customer was a loyal one who hadn't been rescued yet? What if you became known not for being perfect, because you won't be, but for what you do when things go wrong?

That's the transformation. That's what it means to go from disgruntled to grunted.

Let's get started.