



SELLSTATE

## **SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: Part 15 WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS**

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## **SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS**

At one time or another every real estate professional has had to work with clients whose attitudes and behavior have interfered with getting the work done or the sale closed. Maybe you've even been difficult a few times yourself. Unfortunately, it is next to impossible to change the behavior of a difficult client. But it is possible to change how you respond to that behavior and hopefully to save the sale.

Use this tool kit—including a ready-to-go agenda, activities, and talking points—to help improve your salespeople's understanding of how to work with difficult clients.

Each element of this tool kit is numbered at the top of the page so you can easily move through the content chronologically.

# SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

## Component 1: Facilitator Talking Points

These notes will guide you and your salespeople through a discussion and activities that will help them acquire new skills in dealing more successfully with difficult clients.

### Pre-meeting preparation:

- Review all the meeting documents in this kit

Print the following:

1. These facilitator notes—Component 1
2. The Working with Difficult People Agenda—Component 2
3. Handout 1: Ten Tips on Dealing with Difficult People—Component 3
4. Activity 1: Five Common Jerks and How to Deal with Them—Component 4
5. Activity 1: Common Jerks Idea Sheet—Component 5
6. Handout 2: Identifying Communication Styles—Component 6
7. Handout 3: Defusing Dialogues—Component 7
8. Activity 2: Scenes from a Difficult Life—Component 8
9. Activity 2: Difficult Life Idea Sheet—Component 9
10. Handout 4: Firing Your Client—Component 10

### Welcome (1 min.)

### True stories (2 min.)

1. Relate a personal story about a difficult client who eventually bought a home from you.
2. Ask the group to share stories about the most difficult client they ever worked with. Ask if they were able to salvage the situation.

To segue from the true stories to the discussion, remind participants that difficult clients still buy homes; so learning to work with them can mean a higher sales volume.

# SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

## Component 1: continued

### **Background and goals (2 min.)**

In some instances, people act difficult because they are placed in a difficult situation. In many others, they behave in a difficult fashion for the same reason that a 3-year-old child cries; last time it got the results they wanted, so they are going to do it again.

In this meeting, we will:

- Review tips for working with difficult people.
- Learn to identify different disruptive behaviors.
- Practice techniques that will help defuse difficult situations.
- Consider how to fire the client.

### **Handout 1: Ten Tips for Dealing with Difficult People (5 min.)**

Ask one participant to read one of the tips and then to give an example of a situation in which this tip might be useful.

### **Activity 1: Five Common Jerks and How to Deal with Them. (10 min.)**

Ask participants to read the descriptions of the difficult people described in the handout and write down ideas for dealing with each type of client. Call on participants to share their responses with the group and write each response on a flip chart. Use the Jerks Idea Sheet (Component 5) provided to guide the discussion.

### **Handout 2: Identifying Communication Styles (5 min.)**

Discuss each of the three principal ways that people absorb and convey information. After reading each approach, ask one or more participants to suggest a way to adapt their usual ways of speaking to this style.

### **Handout 3: Defusing Dialogues (5 min.)**

Consider some words and responses that may help defuse difficult situations. After reviewing the phrases in the handout (Component 7), ask participants to suggest other words or phrases that they have used successfully and write them on a flip chart.

### **Activity 2: Scenes from Difficult Life (10-15 min.)**

Read each of the three scenarios. Ask participants what actions our harried salesperson could have taken that might have improved these situations. Use the explanations provided (Component 9) to guide the discussion.

## **SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS**

### **Component 1: continued**

#### **Handout 4: Firing Your Client (5 min.)**

Review phrases that salespeople can use to sever a relationship with a client. Emphasize that this break should be handled professionally, and that, if possible, the client should be referred to another salesperson in the company.

#### **Adjourn.**

Thank participants for their time.

**Running Time:** 50 min.

# **SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS**

## **Component 2: Agenda**

**Welcome (1 min.)**

**True stories (2 min.)**

**Background and goals (2 min.)**

**Handout 1: Ten Tips for Dealing with Difficult People (5 min.)**

Read these tips, and talk about ways to apply them to actual situations.

**Activity 1: Five Common Jerks and How to Deal with Them (10 min.)**

Consider a few strategies for working with some problem people.

**Handout 2: Identifying Communication Styles (5 min.)**

Assess the three principal ways people communicate as a way to break down the barriers in a difficult situation.

**Handout 3: Defusing Dialogues (5 min.)**

Learn some suggested phrases that will ease difficult situations and help get to the root of the conflict.

**Activity 2: Scenes from a Difficult Life (10-15 min.)**

Practice your techniques in these real-life situations.

**Handout 4: Firing the Client (5 min.)**

Learn what to do when you've tried everything else.

**Adjourn.**

**Running Time:** 50 minutes.

## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 3: Handout 1, 10 Tips on Dealing with Difficult People

- 1. Maintain self-control.** Losing your cool and giving in to emotion will only escalate the situation. Lower your voice and speak slowly.
- 2. Ask non-threatening questions** beginning with "what" to identify the root cause of the difficulty.
- 3. Listen to the customer's reason for being difficult.** Few people are difficult without a reason—even if that reason doesn't seem important to you.
- 4. Acknowledge the problem,** and then repeat it back to the client to ensure understanding.
- 5. Don't argue.** Justifying your actions will only fuel the difficulty. If you do feel you must defend your actions, give your one best reason and then stop.
- 6. Apologize**—even if you think the client is wrong. Avoid assigning blame, even if the client's actions helped create the situation.
- 7. Offer to rectify the situation**—make a specific commitment as to what actions you will take. If you can't make things right, offer an alternative solution.
- 8. Continue to act professionally.** Demonstrate a high level of professional competence, and make doubly sure that every detail of the transaction is handled correctly.
- 9. Analyze what caused the client's behavior** so that you can avoid a repetition of the incident.
- 10. Set limits on what you will tolerate.** Saying "no" to a client is OK. If you want to try and preserve the relationship, ask your manager or another salesperson to act as a mediator.

## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 4: Activity 1, Five Common Jerks and How to Deal with Them

**Directions:** Read the description of each type of difficult behavior. Use the space after each description to suggest some responses to this behavior.

**1. The Complainers:** These malcontents find fault with everything—a big house is too drafty and hard to heat; a small house is cramped and doesn't have enough room for the furniture. No issue is too small to complain about and no outcome is good.

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**2. The Intimidators:** These aggressive types use anger, rudeness, and abuse to get their way. They often try to provide very little information on wants and needs as a way to control the situation. Whatever goes wrong, they blame you and expect you to fix the problem.

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**3. The Clams:** These silent sorts confront a situation by shutting down and replying to your questions about the home on view with a "yes," a "no," or a shrug. They use silence as an aggressive weapon, often accompanying it with folded arms, glares, or frowns. In some instances, this response may also be prompted by insecurity or a fear of being wrong.

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**4. The Indecisives:** These vacillators don't know what they want and don't have the confidence to make a decision. They constantly want to discuss the decision with others. You could spend half your career with these people before they buy. They like verbal information because it can be changed at will.

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## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 4: continued

**5. The Know-It-All:** These windbags usually have just enough information to be dangerous to the transaction. They often distract attention from important issues by focusing on minor ones. They want the respect of others and to be seen as important.

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## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 5: Activity 1, Five Common Jerks Idea Sheet

**1. The Complainers:** These malcontents find fault with everything—a big house is too drafty and hard to heat; a small house is cramped and doesn't have enough room for the furniture. No issue is too small to complain about and no outcome is good.

**Strategy:** Don't allow complainers to dwell on their grievances. Interrupt them once you feel you have a sense of what the real issue is. Turn the complaint around on them by asking them what they would do to change a situation. Try to keep things optimistic, and don't let complainers pull you down to their way of thinking. Be sure that you get complainers to participate in all decisions, or they will find fault with the outcome later.

**2. The Intimidators:** These aggressive types use anger, rudeness, and abuse to get their way. They often try to provide very little information on wants and needs as a way to control the situation. Whatever goes wrong, they blame you and expect you to fix the problem.

**Strategy:** Intimidators have a strong need to show themselves and the world that they are always right. Never show weakness or respond emotionally to this type; it only gives them more ammunition. Maintain eye contact, and don't get drawn into an argument. Try to move them to a non-public area and let them vent. Often they are reasonable once they have finished their tantrum. If the outburst goes on too long, quietly call a halt.

**3. The Clams:** These silent sorts confront a situation by shutting down and replying to your questions about the home on view with a "yes," a "no," or a shrug. They use silence as an aggressive weapon, often accompanying it with folded arms, glares, or frowns. In some instances, this response may also be prompted by insecurity or a fear of being wrong.

**Strategy:** Don't lose confidence and start babbling. Keep smiling. Ask open-ended questions that will force a more detailed response. Turn the tables and be silent yourself. If the lack of response seems to come from fear, reassure the clam that there are no stupid questions and that everyone has moments of concern when making a major purchase such as a home.

## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 5: continued

**4. The Indecisives:** These vacillators don't know what they want and don't have the confidence to make a decision. They constantly want to discuss the decision with others. You could spend half your career with these people before they buy. They like verbal information because it can be changed at will.

**Strategy:** Encourage indecisives to share their misgivings, and then listen carefully for indirect words and omissions that may indicate the real problem. Ask them to rank problems and deal with them one at a time. Try to bring a more decisive party—a family member, for example—into the negotiation to get things moving. Continue to follow up to head off second thoughts.

**5. The Know-It-All:** These windbags usually have just enough information to be dangerous to the transaction. They often distract attention from important issues by focusing on minor ones. They want the respect of others and to be seen as important.

**Strategy:** The worst thing you can do with this type is ignore them. If at all possible, don't correct know-it-alls in front of others; you'll risk a disagreement. Offer alternative suggestions and ideas in private. Give them an out to save face, but don't agree to act on their ideas.

## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 6: Handout 2, Identifying Communication Styles

Most people use a combination of two or three of these styles to process information and communicate with others. However, the majority of people operate in one principal style about 70 percent of the time and almost always revert to that style when under stress or when making an important decision.

- **Visual.** People who sort information primarily through pictures and use visual words when they speak. They speak rapidly and in a higher tone of voice. They usually maintain good eye contact. About 38 percent of people are visual learners. Say: "See what I mean," or "Get the picture."
- **Auditory.** People who process information by sound clues. They speak evenly and in a soothing tone. They often use auditory words such as "talk," "listen," or "tell." They often show little emotion and are business-like and detail-oriented. About 28 percent of people are auditory. Say: "How does that sound," or "Does that ring a bell?"
- **Kinesthetic.** People who process information through feelings. They speak in choppy sentences with numerous pauses and often use words that describe feelings. They are often very animated and show their emotions. About 34 percent of the population is kinesthetic. Say: "This feels like," or "Get a grasp of."

*Adapted and expanded from "Dealing with Difficult People," Linda Lee Cole, Executive Excellence, January 1995.*

## **SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS**

### **Component 7: Handout 3, Defusing Dialogues**

Using language that makes difficult people less defensive is a sure-fire way to defuse a volatile confrontation.

**Never say:** I'll try

**Instead say:** I will, I can

**Never say:** You should, You ought

**Instead say:** Perhaps you might consider

**Never say:** You have to

**Instead say:** Would you please

**Never say:** Why?

**Instead, say:** What?

**Never say:** Always, never

**Instead say:** In this particular instance

**Never say:** Your problem

**Instead say:** Your situation

**Never say:** You

**Instead say:** I (Talking about your reactions puts other people at ease.)

## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 8: Activity 2, Scenes from a Difficult Life

Fred Friendly, intrepid real estate salesperson, is having a difficult week. Every client he deals with is a problem. Let's see how Fred handles these difficult people and what he might want to do differently next time.

**Scenario One:** Fred begins his day by meeting Wanda Whipple at her hotel. Wanda and her husband Jake are relocating, and Fred plans to show her a half dozen houses. He has had a conference call with the Whipples before they arrived and is confident he has found homes they will like. Four hours later, Fred's not quite so confident. Wanda keeps changing her mind about what she wants. First she tells Fred she must have a big master bedroom, then she worries that small den in the second house will be too small for Jake's study. Finally, she just asked Fred to take her back to the hotel because she's just so confused.

**Scenario Two:** After a hurried lunch returning phone calls, Fred rushes out to meet with Bob Bottoms, a successful local businessperson who wants to buy a larger home and list his current one with Fred. In his hurry, Fred forgets his listing presentation book, which includes the listing agreement. He realizes his mistake halfway there, but decides to use his laptop listing presentation and send the agreement over later. The listing goes well until Fred tells Bob he will have to send the agreement over later. Then Bob hits the roof, telling Fred he doesn't want his time wasted and that he certainly doesn't want to work with someone who can't even remember the contract. Fred, who's had a rough day, just leaves half way through the tirade.

**Scenario Three:** Even though it's now six o'clock, Fred is not done for the day. He has to go sit at an open house for a new listing. The first two hours of the listing go well, and Fred is just beginning to feel a little better, when the seller, Hildegard Smith, comes home early. She immediately begins to complain to Fred because one of the open-house attendees left a wet footprint on her carpet. She goes on to remind Fred that her house has been on the market for two weeks and she hasn't had one offer. Maybe, she says, Fred does not really know how to sell her house.

## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 9: Activity 2 Scenes from a Difficult Life Ideas Sheet

Fred Friendly, intrepid real estate salesperson, is having a difficult day. Every client he deals with is a problem. Let's see how Fred handles these difficult people and what he might want to do differently next time.

**Scenario One:** Fred begins his day by meeting Wanda Whipple at her hotel. Wanda and her husband Jake are relocating, and Fred plans to show her a half dozen houses. He has had a conference call with the Whipples before they arrived and is confident he has found homes they will like. Four hours later, Fred's not quite so confident. Wanda keeps changing her mind about what she wants. First she tells Fred she must have a big master bedroom, then she worries that small den in the second house will be too small for Jake's study. Finally, she just asked Fred to take her back to the hotel because she's just so confused.

**Ideas:** Wanda is a classic indecisive. Fred should encourage her to discuss her misgivings and listen for the underlying issues. In this case, Wanda's concerns and reluctance to move to a new town may be making her indecisive. Fred should give her a tour of the town, talk about features of interest to her, and try to calm her fears. He should also suggest that Jake, who seemed much more decisive on the phone, might want to come along next time they view homes.

**Scenario Two:** After a hurried lunch returning phone calls, Fred rushes out to meet with Bob Bottoms, a successful local businessperson who wants to buy a larger home and list his current one with Fred. In his hurry, Fred forgets his listing presentation book, which includes the listing agreement. He realizes his mistake halfway there, but decides to use his laptop listing presentation and send the agreement over later. The listing goes well until Fred tells Bob he will have to send the agreement over later. Then Bob hits the roof, telling Fred he doesn't want his time wasted and that he certainly doesn't want to work with someone who can't even remember the contract. Fred, who's had a rough day, leaves half way through the tirade.

**Ideas:** While Bob's time is certainly of value, he is clearly an intimidator, who uses his anger to prove his power over others. However, Fred made a mistake walking out; this only reinforced Bob's anger. Instead, Fred should have waited calmly until Bob finished, apologized for the oversight, not tried to justify his mistake, and offered Bob the option of bringing the contract to his office or home at any hour that would be convenient.

## **SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS**

### **Component 9: Activity 2 Scenes from a Difficult Life Ideas Sheet**

**Scenario Three:** Even though it's now six o'clock, Fred is not done for the day. He has to go sit at an open house for a listing. The first two hours of the listing go well, and Fred is just beginning to feel a little better, when the seller, Hildegard Smith, comes home early. She immediately begins to complain to Fred because one of the open-house attendees left a wet footprint on her carpet. She goes on to remind Fred that her house has been on the market for two weeks and she hasn't had one offer. Maybe, she says, Fred does not really know how to sell her house.

**Ideas:** Hildegard just likes to complain, about anything and everything. Fred should apologize for the footprint and suggest that he will ask future visitors to use the mat he will bring with him next time it rains. He should then use the strategy of turning Hildegard's complaints around by asking her how she would solve the problem of marketing. This approach gives Hildegard an opening to express any legitimate concerns. Fred might also suggest that he will meet with Hildegard tomorrow to review a list of marketing strategies.



## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 10: Handout 4, Firing Your Client

#### How to Say, "You're Fired"

**Harsh:** "Your indecision is a real problem. I can see you're not committed to buying."

**Softer:** "It looks like you need more time to think through your decision. Let's put things on hold for a while."

**Harsh:** "Your expectations are unreasonable. I can't afford to spend any more time with you."

**Softer:** "I don't specialize in the types of properties you're looking for, but I can refer you to a salesperson who does."

**Harsh:** "I'm offended that you constantly complain and yell at me."

**Softer:** "I'm sorry I'm not meeting your needs. It's probably best for you to work with someone else."

**Harsh:** "I'm tired of you trying to tell me how to do my job."

**Softer:** "I don't think that I currently have the time to give your property the attention it deserves. Let me refer you to another salesperson."

## SALES MEETING TOOL KIT: WORKING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

### Component 11: Other Resources

Search NAR's [Virtual Library](#) to review articles on working with difficult people.

Look for the following articles at *Realtormag Online*:

["Coping with Clients Who Have an Attitude"](#)

Stacey Moncrieff, *REALTOR® Magazine*, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®, and February 2000.