

Dissatisfied Customers

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When they don't like you, they really don't like you.

Josh wanted to talk through his current, fantastic, "too good to be true" love affair. It was new and he was happy and excited about it. He hoped to learn what was going on from a TCM perspective so he could apply the information with his new lady. He also hoped to use our time together to help him understand what his patients go through and how to more effectively treat them as they encounter love-related experiences in life. Looking at your own life through the TCM theoretical view is a great way to become a better practitioner. Live it, learn it, teach it.

Through email I told Josh about how I work, the length of my sessions, pricing structure, what my focus would be during the session, etc. He agreed to all terms and we set up a meeting. When we met, I listened carefully and asked many questions. I then systematically reiterated everything I had heard, presenting a comprehensive picture of Josh's "story" based upon Five Element, Yin Yang and Zang Fu theories. I felt passionate, concerned (the *qi* patterns made it clear that he would likely run into a freight train of disappointment) and admiring of his willingness to approach his experience this way. I crammed in as much information into the time we had together as possible.

I wanted to give Josh everything I could and took very seriously the fact that he would use what he learned in his practice. Our time together could have long-term ramifications for many people. A few days later Josh sent me an upbeat email sharing how much he had learned, expressing thanks and telling me that he was already seeing his relationship with deeper insight. This little experience represented a small job but nevertheless, a job well done and a customer (patient) satisfied. We love those, don't we?

The interesting twist, and the purpose of this article, came a few months later. The next time I heard from Josh was when I received an email telling me that as I, and several of his friends, had predicted, he and his girlfriend had broken up. The next few sentences contained a series of accusations directed at me. He said I had taken advantage of him during his time of need, he had learned nothing during our meeting, I repeated the same things over and over, I sounded angry because, he stated confidently, he had reminded me of someone I didn't like. Hmm. So much for that positive little experience.

Another example is Clive, a 54-year-old patient who hadn't had an active sexual life with his wife in almost a decade due to sexual function problems. With proper tonification treatments, his intimate life improved. As he and wife rebuilt their relationship, resentment from years of her rejection surfaced. Because he didn't feel safe expressing it to her, he directed it towards me. The healthier he became the more he blamed me for, well, whatever he could.

If you have been in practice long enough you are going to run into dissatisfied patients. Sometimes you make mistakes and your patients don't like it. Other times you don't make mistakes and your patients don't like it. Either way you must know what to do, how to handle the customer service end of your business when a dissatisfied patient/customer situation needs to be addressed.

Let's look at this from two perspectives, the energetic and the practical. Energetically, the more powerful and skillful you are in your work the more your patients are affected by it. This is a good thing, but it can feel both good and bad to your patients. The energy that spirals around in your office is both yang and yin. Healing brings up illness, light identifies and defines darkness. The positive energy that you apply to a patient's life / illness brings up everything unlike itself to be healed.

The better you are at what you do the more likely you are to run into deeper, darker aspects of your patient's energy because you supply a safe place for darkness to express itself. Your work becomes the container for the healing of that which is deeper inside, the older, more toxic aspects of a patient's energetic condition. This can mean you heal patients in ways that are new and, possibly, frightening to them. Hence, following a course of treatment it is possible to be on the receiving end of accolades and gratitude or accusations about things that make no sense to you.

What can you do practically with dissatisfied customers? How, from a business perspective, do you address this problem? Here are some of the methods I use.

1. I listen very carefully to all of their grievances. Then I encourage them to share more by saying things like "Is there anything else bothering you?" I listen until they are completely done talking. I never interrupt or try to abbreviate what an unhappy patient is saying to me. I never cut them off. If I know I won't have sufficient time for the entire conversation I will set up a special meeting time so they aren't interrupted. This also serves to give them time to consider exactly what they want to say.
2. I reiterate, using my own words, everything I have heard them say, including details. Patients will often tell you exactly what made them unhappy and they need to know that you heard them, really heard them. If you got it wrong, even a little, they will correct you. I give them the opportunity to correct me by asking if I heard everything accurately.
3. I ask, specifically, what they want in order to be comfortable again. Disgruntled patients often tell you what it will take to make them happy. Giving them the opportunity to state exactly what they want can help dissipate their tension. Patients may realize if their request is not reasonable when given a chance to hear themselves say it. Others use my help in determining what is going to best work for them.
4. I apologize for whatever falls remotely within the realm of something I can or should apologize for. In Josh's case I apologized for having sounded angry to him even though I was not. It was an honest statement that, I hope, helped him feel my sincerity. I then explained the feelings I was having: concern for him, excitement, empathy, interest in his well being, etc. But I always legitimize a patient's feelings and tend to them as best I can no matter my assessment of their accuracy in reference to my behavior.
5. I make changes to everything I legitimately can within the scope of my practice. For example, if a patient doesn't think I explain myself sufficiently and wants me to talk through exactly what I am doing during every session, even if it means I must plan longer sessions with him, I will do so, if I possibly can. If I can't I will refer him to someone who has more time. If a patient wants his or her money back for a single session, as was the case with Josh, I give it back. All of it. Immediately. As a provider of high quality customer service I see that as a smaller financial loss than a long term, ruinous voice to my reputation. Also, I want my patients to benefit by receiving my support and energy, not taken from. Giving money back can go a long way towards helping someone feel better. It doesn't matter to me if the patient's perception is inaccurate. It matters that they are happy and feel resolution. You may wish to discuss this with your malpractice insurance provider. Some may be concerned

that you are admitting guilt by returning money.

6. I use the conversation as a learning opportunity for my patient, if I can. For example, as his anger increased I asked Clive if he noticed that his opinion of me had changed. Over time he realized that he might be "leaking" some of his rage at his wife into our relationship. This was a big win for his healing process. Ultimately, I found him a male acupuncturist and a male marriage counselor to help him address his health and marital challenges more effectively.

We do our best to make patients feel good but sometimes even our best efforts do not succeed. Having your own plan to address customer/patient dissatisfaction will make the challenges easier and less daunting when they arise. If your plan is effective, the darkness of yin will evolve into the light of yang and malcontent shall be transformed into growth and benefit for your patients.

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