

Dealing With Abusive Customers

Written By Mathew Patterson · July 30, 2025



This post is part of The Supportive, Mathew Patterson's column for customer service professionals. Learn [what The Supportive is](#), or browse through [all of the posts from this series](#).

By [many accounts](#), the abuse of customer service staff has risen dramatically during this long era of COVID chaos, especially in retail.

Intellectually we can all understand that people under very high stress are more likely to lash out, especially at people they perceive to be unlikely to lash back at them. But that does not make it OK.

If businesses allow their customer-facing staff to be abused without taking steps to protect them and without consequence for the abusers, then they are implicitly placing the value of those staff below whatever income that customer represents. This is morally wrong and almost certainly financially wrong, too, considering the costs of replacing a burned-out team member.

So what's the answer? Could AI maybe solve this problem for us? Certainly it is sometimes treated as a technological cure-all. Can you hear that sweet siren song of software that promises to solve everything cheaply and without any uncomfortable conflict between your stated company values and cold, hard cash? I hear it, and I think it's coming from the television across the hall. Let's take a look:



So perhaps AI is not, in this situation at least, going to save the day. The problem of customer service abuse remains for us humans to solve in the real world. Fortunately, there are some practical ways to protect your team.

- **Acknowledge the reality.** Let your team know that you are aware of the abuse and that they are not being overly-sensitive in finding it difficult and reporting it. Make a list of the various types of abuse so everyone has a shared understanding.
- **Set clear boundaries.** Define as clearly as possible what constitutes abusive behavior (as opposed to an upset customer expressing themselves but without personal attack). Collect examples to help define the line between customer frustration and abuse.
- **Put abuse protocols in place.** Write down the steps to take when abuse occurs, who should take those steps, and what happens next. Make those protocols accessible and include them as part of your onboarding and training programs.
- **Improve your personnel information security.** Review your internal security protocols to ensure your team's personal information is not inadvertently being exposed, and give people the chance to redact or change the information that is shared about them.
- **Back up your team during and after incidents.** Abuse policies do no good if people do not feel safe to invoke them because it may impact their career progress, job safety, or internal influence. Make sure your team members know you have their backs whenever it is needed.
- **Take meaningful action against abusers.** What consequences will abusive customers face if they do not change their behavior after being warned? The only long-term solution to reducing abuse is to make sure it is not rewarded. Consider a process for [firing your customers](#).

One of the benefits of online customer service is that the balance of power is different, and we have many more options for de-escalating and handling abuse. They don't require complex technology, just a willingness to be responsible for the welfare of your customer service team, even if it might be costly in the short term.

If you're a customer service leader or you manage them, then that is the job before you. Let's get it done.

Get highlights from The Supportive delivered directly to your inbox

- The Supportive Weekly**
A newsletter and podcast for customer-centric businesses
- Help Scout Weekly**
A roundup of our freshest content and product updates

Email Address [Subscribe](#)

Your privacy matters! View our [privacy policy](#) for more and know you may unsubscribe anytime.

Like what you see? Share with a friend.



Mathew Patterson

After running a support team for years, Mat joined Help Scout, where he helps people deliver better online customer support. Subscribe to [The Supportive Newsletter](#) or find him on [LinkedIn](#).

START FOR FREE

Learn the platform in less than an hour. Become a *power user* in less than a day.

[Start for Free](#) [Book a Demo](#)



Product	Solutions	Compare	Company	Support
Inbox	Education	Zendesk	About	Developers
AI Chatbot	SaaS	Intercom	Customers	Help Docs
Messages	Travel & Hospitality	Freshdesk	Careers	Contact
Insights & Analytics	Real Estate	HubSpot	Newsletters	Status ▲ 99.98%
Apps & Integrations	Property Management	Gorgias	Terms & Privacy	
Mobile	Logistics	Front	Accessibility	
Product updates	Manufacturing		Do Not Sell	
	Financial Services			
	Professional Services			

