

# ADDRESSING CUSTOMER QUESTIONS AND COMPLAINTS

The *Basics* Every Agricultural Retail Employee Should Know





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The *Basics* Every Agricultural Retail Employee Should Know

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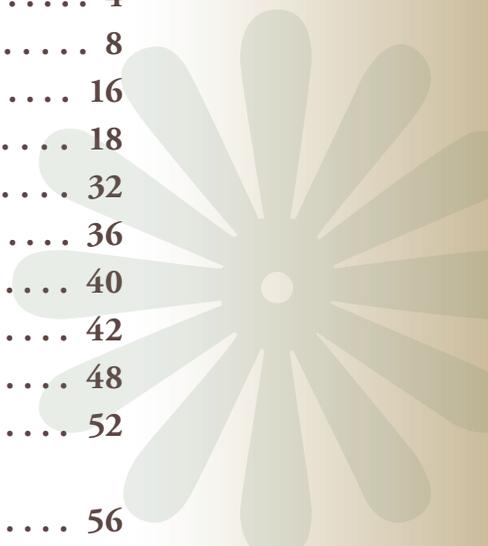
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*Good customer service is really the foundation of being in business. Customers can get your products and services from multiple sources. The only thing they cannot get from those other sources is you! What value do you add to the transaction? If you do not add value, then your customers may decide to go elsewhere with their business.*



## ON THE FRONT LINE WITH *Growers*



**E**ach commercial agricultural retail business — whether a co-op, independently owned operation, or company chain outlet — is challenged to keep abreast of costly advances in machinery, upgrades in computer technology, improvements in seed or crop protection technology, changes in agricultural practices, and expectations of processors, customers, and consumers. You must constantly re-invent your operations and procedures to stay ahead of growers who want the latest techniques, products, and services used on their farms.



## RELATIONSHIPS CHANGING, BUT IMPORTANT

Research shows that farmers' relationships with the agricultural retail industry are changing. Growers are becoming more businesslike. Farming operations have very high expectations, and they simply expect that the retail organizations they work with are knowledgeable and responsive.

Although more farming operations are taking a businesslike approach, trust and relationships are still very important. It is still a people business.



It goes without saying that every employee is important to the success of your ag retail operation. *Your success as an ag retailer depends on your ability to customize the delivery of information and products to your customers, to know what your growers want, and then to do the job to the best of your ability.* The way you answer questions, conduct your work, and the results you deliver influence how growers perceive the value of your ag retail business.

If a customer thinks your employee's work is outstanding, it helps you sell other products



and services. If you fail to deliver on promises or services, then growers are more easily persuaded to take their business to a competitor.





*There is a lot going on when you interact with a customer.*



*Farming is so complex that growers need information just to keep up with the changes in technology and with volatile markets.*





*Farmers require detailed answers to their questions. Companies and universities have professionals who provide specialized information that farmers can use to improve the profitability of their farming operations.*

As a commercial ag retailer, you focus on staying abreast of changing technologies, but what is sometimes forgotten is that the personal side of the business is critical, too. We work with farmers, talk to farmers, and advise farmers — it's a people business first; everything else comes second. If you can't communicate well with your customers about basic questions, it will be more difficult for you to move on to discuss the science and practice of agricultural production.

*This means that answering customer questions effectively* is just as important as keeping up on the latest in products, science, and technology. Because answering customer questions is so important, this publication provides all ag retail employees with a foundation for answering commonly asked customer questions and points out pitfalls to watch for. After reading this publication, anyone in your

company should be able to answer important, basic questions about pesticides, seed, fertilizer, and fuel that growers and neighbors will ask. There also is a form at the end of this publication to help you formulate your own answers to questions not covered in the following pages. ✨



*Part of Wisdom*

Correctly answering questions  
establishes credibility and goodwill.





## **BIG EARS,** *Small Mouths*



**K**nowledge and experience help ag retail employees answer many questions on the spot. But answering some questions are difficult even for the most seasoned professionals. *Correctly* answering questions establishes a level of credibility and goodwill with growers and the public that money and advertisements can't buy.





It's a good idea to train new associates so they can answer questions about a variety of topics — even the things they may not be familiar with. New people may sometimes unintentionally ruin good relationships with current and potential customers. And as your new employees meet your customers, ask your customers for their feedback on how the new employees are doing. Pair experienced employees with new employees as often as possible.

Here are 11 guidelines that will help both new and seasoned employees do a better job answering questions from growers and the public.



### Remember: Every Question Is Important

Every question is important to the person who asks it. A critical aspect of customer service is to deal with questions at the time they are asked. By doing so, you make the customer the most important person at that moment. He or she deserves the best answer your company can possibly provide.

Your ability to respond knowledgeably gives customers confidence in your technical abilities and gives them yet another reason to do business with you and your company.

## 2. Let Customers Finish Their Questions

Interrupting customers is rude, conveys defensiveness, and reduces trustworthiness. Give customers an opportunity to fully express their thoughts without interruption. Waiting isn't just polite, it also gives you more time to think about the question and your response to the question at hand.

Seasoned professionals will also tell you that the first question a customer asks may not be the actual question the customer wants you to answer. Letting customers finish gives your customers time to collect their thoughts, too.



*It takes a team to develop the expertise needed to address the questions your customers will ask.*





### 3. Remember the KISS Principle

There's an old engineering principle that applies to retail operations: Keep It Simple, Stupid (or KISS). You don't need to complicate a simple question with a confusing answer. Do not try to impress growers with long-winded answers filled with large words and scientific jargon. Simplicity is always best. Keeping your answers short and to the point will always improve your ability to communicate. If customers want more information, they can ask follow-up questions.



### 4. Use Words That Come Naturally To You

You can't answer questions effectively if you can't communicate. There is no single script that will help you answer any question from any person. Whenever somebody asks you a question, strive to answer it on the individual's terms, not yours.

Growers appreciate simple, truthful comments. They don't appreciate sales pitches or answers that require advanced degrees to understand. Use words and examples you are comfortable with, because the grower or customer will appreciate answers that come sincerely from you. The grower will feel you are a fake if your answer sounds like a script written by someone else, or if you are sticking to talking points or buzzwords.



### 5. Always Be Honest and Open

Mutual trust builds lasting relationships. You want to trust your customers; they want to trust you. Start with open and honest dialogue. It is the best and only way to do business. If customers believe you are honest, they may be willing to look past your less-than-perfect answers.

Consider this exchange between a grower and applicator. The grower pulled up to the field and asked, "How did everything go?" The applicator replied, "I ran short, but you won't notice it. It's in the back, southeast corner of the field."

What message did the grower hear from this simple exchange?

That's not to say the applicator should have said, "Everything went fine," when, in fact, the applicator did not spray part of the field the grower paid to have treated. Although the applicator might try to get away with a response like this in early spring, there will be an embarrassing conversation by October when the grower finds



a five-acre patch of giant ragweed at harvest.

Being dishonest is an awful way of doing business. *Everything you do in a field will be discovered sooner or later.* Always tell the truth — right then and there. The honest answer for this scenario would be, “I ran short and I wrote it on my work order. I’ll be back as soon as it’s dry in the morning to finish up with the same mix. I just wanted you to know before I left.”

Customers seldom become angry when they are treated with such candor.



## 6. Always Be Polite

As in everyday life, people notice polite behavior. Politeness is the one way to help growers and the public feel more relaxed with you.

Take the time for pleasant exchanges even when you have other things to do. It makes quite an impression. Take the time to ask, “How are

you doing?” and to say, “Everything went well,” and “Have a good day.” And saying “Yes, sir” or “No, ma’am” still work as signs of respect. Simple courtesies reinforce your relationship and the image of your company.

## 7. Keep Company Problems to Yourself

Airing out internal company problems with customers — whether personal or professional — tells customers one thing: you have loose lips. When you share negative or personal things about your employer or other employees, customers will wonder what you are telling others about their business. Customers value privacy; they don’t appreciate everyone knowing their business.

Internal issues and problems at your company are best kept in-house. While you may be upset, telling others about your problems actually hurts other employees you call friends. Remember, the customer pays the bills that keep you in business. If your negative company gossip drives off a customer, you take money out of everybody’s pocket — including your own.



*Don’t say anything about your company that you would not want to appear on local television or in the newspaper.*



## 8. Never Bad-mouth the Competition

Every company has great products to sell, otherwise they would not be in business. It's a professional courtesy to avoid discussing competitors. Bad-mouthing the competition never makes you look better. It cheapens the relationship with your customers and is unprofessional. When you disparage competitors, you are in fact, telling customers they had poor judgment for hiring those competitors. Even if true, this can be insulting and won't sit well with any customer.

Instead of running down your competitor, it's better to stick to yourself and your company — “I don't know what they do, but here is what we do.” Doing this changes the conversation and keeps a positive focus on what you and your retail outlet have to offer. Growers can make their own decisions.



*Questions asked at a field day are critically important.*



*Companies provide the resources, but it is employees who make the connections with customers.*



## 9. If You Don't Know, Don't Guess

Know your limits and know when to admit you don't know the answer. When you speculate about issues or ramble beyond your limits, you may say wrong things or make promises that you cannot deliver.

You really know you're out on a limb when that sinking feeling settles in the pit of your stomach. You're providing an answer, but deep down, a voice says, "You don't know what you're talking about." Customers can sense (or will find out later) that you were guessing, or worse, lying.



When that inner voice speaks to you, tell your customer, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out.”

In today’s complex farming environment, incorrect answers cost money. Don’t put yourself or your company in the spot of having to defend your misstatement.



*Use cell phones to your advantage. Use them when customers ask you questions and you need to get help from other members of your ag retail team.*

Customers expect their questions to be answered truthfully and correctly. There is nothing wrong with telling a grower that you can’t answer his or her question with absolute certainty. Say you’ll find out and get back with an answer.

Experience shows that customers do not think highly of custom applicators who guess at the answers. If possible, call the office immediately to get an answer. It gives customers confidence that you’ll go out of your way to help them with their questions.

Another approach is to call your supervisor (or the person who knows the answer). Explain that the customer asked a good question, you have some ideas, but you need to make sure you have the right information.

Sometimes getting the right answer will take time. If that’s the case, let your customers know that, too — “I will let Bob know you’ve asked, because he can answer that for you,” or “Is it acceptable if I call Dave and have him call you with the answer?” If it takes time to come up with an appropriate answer, then call the customer back and say, “I am still working on that. I’ll get back with you later.” Do your homework, research the question, and be proud when you call your customer back.

This way of operating also requires commitment from the retailer. Encourage employees to get the right answers by helping them. If an employee calls with a tough question, don’t get upset or short with the employee. Remember that the employee is taking care of your customer, which is what you want.

## 10. Own Their Questions

When customers ask you something and you don’t know the answer, don’t just pass the question off to someone else and forget about it. Everyone is busy. The people that you ask to help you may have good intentions, but they may get busy and forget to answer your customer’s question.





If that happens, it not only makes the company look bad, it also reflects poorly on you. After all, you were the person who promised that somebody in the company would be in touch with an answer.

Follow up with customers and ask if anyone got back with them. That will let your customers know that their questions are important enough for you to remember and that you actually care about helping them.

## 11. Ensure Follow-up by Writing Questions Down

If you have to find answers, always write the questions down in a notebook along with the customer's name and phone number, and the date. Provide the agronomist, crop specialist, or branch manager with the questions as soon as possible. Tell the specialist that you promised the grower somebody would call back with an answer. It puts the responsibility on management to make the return call.

It's also important to find out the answer for yourself. Ask the specialist about the answer to your customer's question. That way, you can answer the question yourself if it comes up again.



When a specialist calls the customer, it reinforces the your effort with the customer — “[Name of employee] told me to call you, because you had a question you wanted answered. I’m glad he let me answer it.”

If the specialist hasn't been able to get back to your customer yet, it's best to just apologize and explain what you'll do about it. Don't start the “blame game.” Try saying, “I’m sorry. That’s not like [name of agronomist]. Let me track down what happened.”

We all know that when we're busy, things can fall between the cracks. If you truly can't get action from the specialist, then ask someone for help. A conversation to ask for help is better for everyone than losing a customer.

Not only should somebody follow up on customers' questions, somebody in the company should collect the questions in a central location. Management should review these questions and answers regularly, and then include frequently asked questions in regular training for new and current employees. The Appendix on page 58 includes a simple form you can use for recording questions and answers. ✨





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# *Addressing* **CUSTOMER QUESTIONS**



*Part of Wisdom*

Success comes from selling products or services not once, but multiple times.

**T**oday's retail employees are specialists. Although a seed expert might not know how to spray a field, or an applicator might not know how to select the right hybrid, each one should know some of the basics. This is important, because when customers ask questions, you want everyone in your company to be able to provide an intelligent response. If you are asked a question that falls outside your area of expertise, you can recommend customers to the right people in your organization who can give them the details they seek.



When you answer a question poorly, it makes it more difficult for the person who follows up with the customer to deal with the question. Whether it's about price or the availability of products and services, starting out right provides smoother communication with you customers.

Expect some questions to stump you. You might need to do some research before you can give a credible answer. Other questions might have to be passed on to others in your company. But over time, questions become easier to answer as you gain experience.

The answers provided below are general. You may need to modify the answers to specific questions to suit the way your company operates. Always keep track of your customers' frequently asked questions and train your employees how to answer them. ✨



*You might be the pesticide applicator, but when you are talking with the customer, you represent all of your colleagues. You should know enough about the other parts of your operation to answer basic questions customers will ask you.*

# ANSWERING CUSTOMER QUESTIONS ABOUT *Pesticides*



## KEEP TRACK OF NEW QUESTIONS

Chances are, this publication didn't answer every frequently asked question your customers will ask. The Appendix on page 58 is a form you can use to record new questions and possible answers. Share those answers with your employees.



**B**elow are some frequently asked questions (and possible answers) about pesticides. Do you know how you would answer these questions?

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**Question:** “Can you do this other 40-acre field for me while you are treating the rest of my fields? The neighbor along that property gives me fits. He’s still angry because two years ago the wind carried my spray over onto his garden, fruit trees, and flowers.”

**Possible Answer:** “I’m glad you gave me the heads up. We’ll do our best to make sure the application is done at the right time, so we will not run into any problems between you and your neighbor. Let me go ahead and call my branch manager to see if we can fit this into our schedule. The last thing we want to do is to make that neighbor mad at you again.”



**Something to Think About:** Ag retailers should always encourage their customers to tell them about neighbors who have been upset with them in the past. In some cases, growers will “let” ag retailers spray these fields, because they believe if there is a mistake, the retailer’s insurance will cover the cost. That might be true, but if there is a problem, the neighbor will still be angry with the grower and you.

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**Question:** “Do you know how many acres I have in this field? It always seems that when you spray my field, you report more acres than what’s listed with the local USDA office. Something’s wrong with your totals.”



**Possible Answer:** “Actually, we do know. The monitors we’re using today are more precise than when your acres were first calculated. Sometimes, the discrepancy is because the USDA based its numbers on a flatter view — they cannot calculate how much extra area is on a hill.

“The way we verify the number of acres is to see what we have left in the tank after a full load. Because application rates are based on the product and the issue we’re addressing, the remainder should indicate that we’re pretty close to what it should be based on the acres. Our application equipment comes with applied mapping. If you wish, I can send you a map showing the exact acres we applied.”

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**Question:** “How can that tiny package of herbicide cost so much? I’ve seen aspirin bottles bigger than that stuff, and they sure cost a whole lot less.”



**Possible Answer:** “It does seem like a lot of money for a little packet, but the product works well on your weed problems. These products are more active and concentrated than the products that were available in the past. Just a few ounces per acre will achieve the weed control we want. This little packet actually covers 50 acres because we use it at such a low rate. When you look at the total cost of the product and divide it by the number of acres, you’ll see it’s about the same cost as other products that we apply by the pound.

“Plus, these smaller packets save you money in the long run because you’re not spending money

to ship ‘filler’ that won’t help you treat the problem. It does such a good job and it is so much more efficient because we don’t have to dump all the jugs into the tank.”





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**Question:** “I don’t have much confidence in this stuff. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. If I see a failure with the weeds, how soon do you want me to let you know?”

**Possible Answer** (*when the retail outlet does the spraying*): “These products take some time to work, so don’t call tomorrow. I’d like you to wait long enough to give the herbicide a chance to do its job. Depending on the herbicide, you’ll know 10-14 days after I’ve sprayed whether it’s working or not. If you’re concerned after this, definitely give us a call. We will want to look at the field.”



**Possible Answer** (*when the grower buys the product and does his or her own application*): “We want to make sure we match the right product to the problem. The products we sell work well. If something isn’t working, we really need to know about how the product was used. There are many variables that affect performance, and I think that’s why many growers have us make the applications.

“If you have concerns two weeks after your application, we’ll want to take a look at several things, such as: What weeds are you seeing? What rates did you use?

What adjuvants did you mix with the product? What was the mixing order? What was the time of day? What was the carrier volume? and What size were the weeds when you applied the product?

“We didn’t see the field, so it is very hard to pass judgment on something we did not see. In most cases, we’d prefer to know within 10-14 days of the application so that we can follow up with the appropriate parties. This allows us to better understand your problem and make an improved recommendation for this specific problem in the future.”

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**Question:** “Can you fill up this 2.5-gallon jug out of your bulk tank? I only need a little bit more to finish up my fields.”



**Possible Answer:** “I really wish I could; however, we can’t fill jugs out of the bulk tanks. It is against state law because the label says the jug is nonrefillable, and the both of us could get in serious trouble for doing it. I would be happy to fill your minibulk with that amount, or we’ll go up to the store to get you the same product in a smaller package size.”

*The weeds weren’t controlled in this field because it had a population of glyphosate-resistant marestalk.*

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**Question:** “If the product doesn’t work well, will you stand behind it?”



**Possible Answer:** “Absolutely. We support our products and we will give you the best value possible. If there is a problem, I will come back to see what the problem is. If it’s a problem with the product, we’ll call the manufacturer and have the representative look at it. We will find out whether it’s an issue with the weather, pesticide, field, or application. Between the manufacturer, us, and you, we will make things right.”

*Notice the cupped soybean leaves, which were caused by an application of glyphosate. The problem was that the glyphosate product was contaminated with a growth regulator herbicide. In this case, the farmer worked out a settlement with the agricultural retailer.*

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**Question:** “If I give you more acres to spray, can you do it for less?  
Don’t you guys give deals to larger customers?”



**Possible Answer:** “That’s a question you would have to ask my manager. I’m really not involved in pricing. From my experience, we treat every customer the same regardless of the size of their operation. Let’s give him a call to see what he says. I’m sure we’d love to take care of more acres for you.”

**Something to Think About:** There are many reasons certain customers may receive better prices. Your company may want to attract new business, bundle more products, or reward their loyal customers. In many cases, custom applicators should not discuss pricing with any customer. That can create serious problems. Leave price negotiations to the management team.

*Each lane down a customer’s field represents different interactions with that customer. How you respond to and follow-up on questions can make those bonds stronger or weaker.*





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**Question:** “Why should I work with you guys? I can get it done cheaper down the road!”



**Possible Answer:**

“I can only speak for us, but I can say that we do it right because we have good people throughout our operation. Our equipment is top-of-the-line, and is equipped with GPS and application monitors. We take responsibility for what we do. We believe in customer service, and getting the job done right. We document what we do, and our applicators keep in constant contact with the branch

manager and our agronomists. These are some of the things we do differently than others. Let’s call the manager to set up a time with him so the two of you can discuss prices.”

**Something to Think About:** Stay focused on what you do, not what others do!

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**Question:** “Can you spray the fields when we want them done?”

**Possible Answer:** “We will try our best. The biggest thing you can do is give us as much advanced notice as you can. Give us a couple of days before you plant to allow us to get your fields scheduled. If you anticipate that you need us to apply something the next day, try to call first thing the previous morning. The better and earlier we communicate, the better job we can do to get the product applied when you want it. When we have good lead-time, we can usually get it done.

“Where we struggle is when somebody calls us and asks for us to apply something immediately — like anybody else, we may already be committed to applying somewhere else. Providing good lead-time gets your field done over the guy who calls at the last minute. That doesn’t mean we can’t ever fit fields in at the last minute, but it works best when you can give us some notice.”

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**Question:** “Why have your custom application rates gone up? You guys are charging \$2 more an acre than your competitor. It’s just an application.”



**Possible Answer:** “I don’t deal with the pricing. That’s all done through the office. But I can say that the rates are based on a number of factors: the cost of the machine, labor, fuel, maintenance, and insurance. As you know from buying tractors and fuel, prices have not gone down. You see the kind of equipment we run. You know I’ve been doing this for you for many years, and I know your fields pretty well. You’ve seen what we can do. It’s certainly possible that you can get it done cheaper, but are you going to get the same job? Let me

call the office to set up a time so you can discuss your concerns with the manager or agronomist.”



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**Question:** “When I call you, how long will it take you to get to our place? What happens when the weather backs you up?”

**Possible Answer:** “Usually, depending on the season, we can get to everything within a couple days or less. We’ll do our best to spray when you want as long as we can get across the field and do the job we know you expect. We want good weather so you can get your

money’s worth. The products are too expensive to waste just trying to get it on. Products need to be applied in a timely manner. Wouldn’t you agree?

“If the weather sets us back a few days, we will call and let you know when we expect to be back in your area again. It would help us to know when you think we could get on the field or if you did not get as much rain as others. The more you communicate with us, the better job we can do for you.”





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**Question:** “Don’t worry about that 66-foot buffer zone for atrazine, because I need the whole area sprayed!”

**Possible Answer:** “As a custom applicator I have to watch that buffer zone to make sure I stay legal. I could get fined, or could even lose my license if I spray the buffer zone and get caught. My job and my family depend on me having a pesticide license.

“We used to do a lot of that before the labels changed. Times have changed and we must respect the label, because the label is the law. Our job is to put the stuff on legally and that means following the label. With this specific product we have to pay attention to buffer areas. That’s the law. I do know that there is another product we can apply in the buffer area to control your weeds. I hate to put you off, but I will give the manager a call to see what options we have.”



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**Question:** “What will you do to make sure you aren’t hurting my neighbors with drift? They will be screaming at me if you screw up.”

**Possible Answer:** “Well, if that’s the case, today may be not the best day to spray the mix we have. Right now, we don’t have any drift control in this load. If that’s a concern, we probably need to call in and add some drift control. I can

lay back a little, but I’d rather add a drift control product to the mix.

“Right now, I can spray the bulk of the field and come back to spray the border when the winds have died down. Or, I can spray this load on another not-so-sensitive field and come back with the same product that has a drift control product added.”





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**Question:** “The last guy made the comment that since I’m not planting back there, there is no need to spray in that corner. Do you agree with that?”

**Possible Answer:** “I try to get every corner. If you notice, we back into the corners to the best of our ability as long as there is not a wet area. We want to try to get as much of the field or cropped area as we can. If you ordered 70 acres of product and it’s a 70-acre field, we are going to do all acres and all corners with or without a crop.”

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**Question:** “Do you have a fence row nozzle or do you just let them go?”

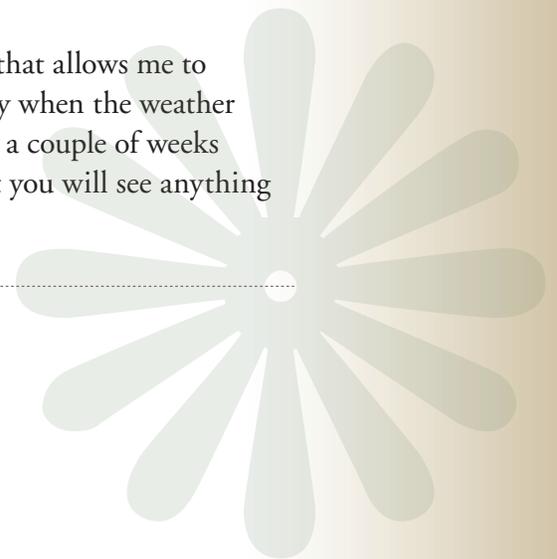
**Possible Answer:** “I do have a fence row nozzle, but don’t use it unless you ask me to. We can turn it on or off depending on what you want. My records show you wanted the fence row sprayed. Is that still the case?”

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**Question:** “I’m paying you a lot of money per acre to spray my fields. You’re driving pretty fast. Wouldn’t it better if you went slower?”

**Possible Answer:** “Yes, we do move right along. That’s what I like about the guidance system and monitoring equipment I have. My applicator has high-volume pumps, the boom is equipped with big spray tips, and we have a good spray pattern. This machine was made and designed to be able to spray at 16 mph. I’m running at 12 mph, because that’s where I feel more comfortable to get the best job done.

“I try to be efficient on your farm and others, because that allows me to finish up others and get your fields taken care of accurately when the weather is good. At this speed, I get great weed control. Call me in a couple of weeks and let me know what the weed control looks like. I doubt you will see anything but dead weeds.”





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**Question:** “When I did my own applications, I always used 20 gallons of water. Wouldn’t you agree that the more water you use, the better the coverage will be? How much water are you going to use?”



**Possible Answer:** “It depends on where we are in the season, the stage of the weeds, and what products we are using. We start out in early spring at 10 gallons per acre. Later in the season (when we have bigger weeds or feel like we need better coverage, or depending on the specific products), we change to 15 gallons per acre. We’re happy that you chose to trust our experience and have us take care of your fields.

“We’ve been spraying a lot of acres with these volumes and it has been working well. We’ve been really happy with the performance at 10-15 gallons.

You’ll be happy with the results. Our company is known for getting the job done right the first time. I know you wouldn’t want your field applied twice, and frankly, I don’t want to drive through this field a second time! We stand behind our work.”

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**Question:** “Three or four of my buddies are going to buy this material to apply. What’s your bottom line?”



**Possible Answer:** “I don’t deal with pricing, but I know it’s important to you. I’d be happy to arrange for a time for my manager to talk with you about that.”

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**Question:** “Why didn’t the herbicide you applied work as well this season?”

**Possible Answer:** “There are a lot of things that can be different from one season to the next. Since we sprayed it three months ago, it’s going to be tough to try to figure out what factors resulted in the performance you’re seeing now. We can look at the weather conditions at the time of application and see if there was any concern. We do our best to get to all of our fields to recheck the application.

“In the future, please let us know a little sooner that there is a problem. We can almost always do something to correct it. Let’s give the manager a call to see if she’s had other problems with this product.”

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**Question:** “Nothing against you, but I want Sarah to spray those fields. She knows what I want done.”

**Possible Answer:** “I’m really glad she’s done a great job for you. I know she’s really tied up on some acres right now. If you just really want her, I can check with the manager to see when she can treat your fields. But, if you want it done today, I’m here, I’m loaded, and I’m ready to go. Sarah kept good notes for me about your field and I know that 30 acres beyond the stake are someone else’s. I can do a good job for you today.”

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**Question:** “How serious are you about your work as [name the position]?”



**Possible Answer:**

“I take my job very seriously, because it’s not like I’m going to disappear overnight. I know if I don’t do a good job I’m going to have to face you later. I want to do this right so I can earn your business next time, too.”

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**Question:** “I know that stuff is not labeled for the crop, but your competitor down the road told me that it works well for them on Canada thistle. Since you’re spraying this field now, could you add some of that product to the tank?”

**Possible Answer:** “Everything in the tank has to be approved by my manager or crop specialist. We are not allowed to add any chemical to the sprayer that is not labeled for the site. Let’s figure out what we can do legally to control the thistle. Let’s call the manager to see what we can do.”

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**Question:** “It’s not that windy! Just add some antidrift product to the mix. Anyway, you’re insured, and I need to get the job done today!”

**Possible Answer:** “The risk is just too high for you and for us. Even adding a drift retardant will help us just so much. It’s too windy to treat the field. We’ll have to come back at another time. I apologize, but I have to make sure we do it right. And while we may be insured, if the wind is blowing the product off your fields, it’s blowing your money off into your neighbor’s field, too.”

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**Question:** “Do what I want, or I’ll take my business elsewhere!”

**Possible Answer:** “I’m sorry you feel that way. I can only do what I’m trained and scheduled to do. I can’t jeopardize the company, my livelihood, and your neighbors with an application that is not legal or environmentally responsible. We should work together to do the best possible job we can for you. I really don’t feel comfortable doing what you ask. Let’s call my manager to see what she thinks.”

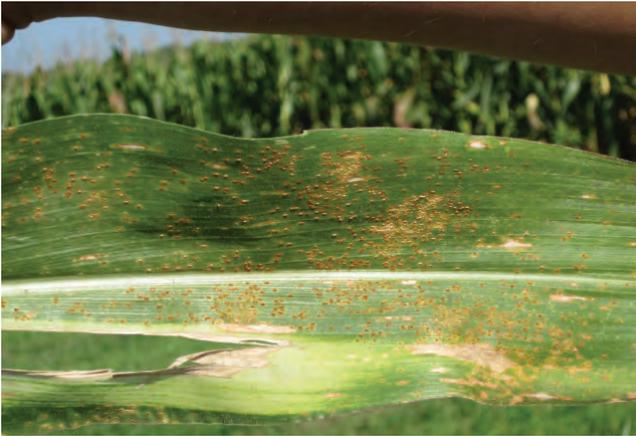
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**Question:** “In your opinion, is it worth the money to apply a fungicide to corn when it is tasseling?”

**Possible Answer:** “It depends on the genetics and the amount of disease in the field. Research has shown that when disease pressure is high, you will likely see a response in yield that will pay for the treatment or return more money than you spent.

“The problem is, I can’t predict in the winter what the disease pressure is going to be like. But we can look at the hybrid to see how it responds to diseases and





fungicide applications. Let's get you in touch with the agronomist to see what information we know about the hybrids you are thinking about planting this spring.

"We can also scout the fields this summer around the time the fungicide needs to be applied. If there are a lot of disease symptoms visible, then we'll recommend a treatment. If we don't see many lesions and the forecast looks like it is going to be dry for an extended period, then we probably do not recommend spending the money on the fungicide treatments."

**Possible Answer:** "Ultimately, it depends on whether we can detect enough disease pressure in the crop at that time. If there is no disease present,

there's no reason to apply fungicides at that time. That's why I cannot predict in January whether your crop will benefit from foliar fungicide next summer.

"If you plant hybrids with genetic resistance to the major diseases we worry about in corn (like gray leaf spot), you minimize the chances that you will need a foliar fungicide. Since many of the important foliar diseases survive in old corn crop residue, you can also minimize the risk of foliar diseases in next year's crop by avoiding continuous corn. Next summer, as the time approaches to make your decision, let us walk your fields to assess the disease pressure and help you make a decision about whether to spray your fields."

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**Question:** "How can I tell whether I am getting my money's worth with these corn-applied fungicides?"

**Possible Answer:** "Actually, that's simple. Just don't turn on the sprayer when you make a run through the field. Leave a few unsprayed check strips if you're spraying with high-clearance equipment and check the yield in those areas with a yield monitor. If you plan to use an aerial applicator to apply the fungicide, see what they can do to leave parts of it unsprayed. It's the only way you are going to know for sure."

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# ANSWERING CUSTOMER QUESTIONS ABOUT *Seed*



## KEEP TRACK OF NEW QUESTIONS

Chances are, this publication didn't answer every frequently asked question your customers will ask. The Appendix on page 58 is a form you can use to record new questions and possible answers. Share those answers with your employees.



**B**elow are some frequently asked questions (and possible answers) about seed. Do you know how you would answer these questions?

**Question:** “Why are my seed costs so high? How come a bag of corn is \$300 when it used to be \$200?”

**Possible Answer:** “Seed companies are adding more traits to corn to help enhance your yields. In 1996, when the first traited biotech corn came out, it was resistant to corn borer. Since then, the plants have been bred to resist corn

rootworm, other insects, and some herbicides.

“The good news is that stacking corn with *Bt* genes means that we usually don’t need to use insecticides for corn borers or rootworms. So you’re saving money. That helps to bring down your costs per acre by having fewer pesticide passes through the fields. These corn hybrids produce 30 to 50 more bushels per acre than in the past.



Considering that field alone, your yields are more than offsetting the higher cost.

“Finally, the same research that resulted in these traited products (like corn borer resistance) is going to help develop corn that might make it more drought tolerant. There is so much ongoing research on new products, and it takes money to make it happen. Overall, I think most farmers are enjoying the higher yields, although I know the investment to get them is higher today.”

**Possible Answer:** “Seed corn costs more today for two main reasons.

“First, the costs of all crop inputs have increased in response to the higher prices you receive for your grain today than in years past. That is simply a fact of life as input suppliers seek their share of the higher income you receive.

“Second, seed companies need to recoup the costs of their biotechnology research that develops the improved traits that result in increased stress tolerance in today’s hybrids. If you consider how well hybrids perform today — in spite of variable and extreme crop stresses — their improved yield potential more than pays for the increase in seed cost.”





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**Question:** “It seems like I am paying for a bunch of biotech traits that I don’t even need!”

**Possible Answer:** “I understand, but you need to remember that the hybrids you purchased years ago probably also had genetic traits or characteristics that you did not need. Whether biotech or traditional plant breeding, most hybrid traits are what we call ‘defensive’ traits. This means that they protect the crop if a particular stress occurs. Since we usually cannot predict with certainty whether a specific stress will occur next year, think of these defensive traits like crop insurance. You may believe a particular biotech trait has no benefit to your operation, so you have the option to purchase hybrids without that particular trait.

“For example, if corn rootworm is rarely an important pest in your fields, you could decide not to purchase seed corn with the *Bt* trait that protects the crop against that pest. We can provide you with a handy table that lists the biotech traits for each hybrid we sell so you can pick and choose your biotech traits more confidently.”

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**Question:** “OK, I can get your seed [replace seed with any product or service] at a fair price, but if I have a problem, can I call you? Are you going to be there when I need you?”

**Possible Answer:** “You betcha! We take pride in our customer service. There are many people who stand behind our company who can come in and help. All we have to do is ask and there will be someone with that expertise to help.”

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**Question:** “How come you are suggesting that I raise my planting population for corn? I used to plant at 25,000 seeds per acre, and now you want me to plant at 32,000 or 33,000?”

**Possible Answer:** “Because results from university on-farm trials show that today’s hybrids yield best at those seeding rates.”

**Possible Answer:** “One of the components of yield is the number of ears per acre. One of the ways to increase yield is to harvest more ears per acre. The only way to do that currently is to increase the number of plants per acre. Today’s hybrids respond to higher plant populations better than yesterday’s hybrids, primarily because of improved tolerance to stress and greater stalk health. These newer genetic improvements have allowed much denser populations to help achieve higher yields.”





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**Question:** “How come you are telling me to pay for treating my soybean seed when I never had to do it in the past?”



**Possible Answer:** “Treating soybean seed is always your choice. We recommend treating seed if you expect to plant your beans earlier than you did in the past. It makes sense to plant earlier since experience has shown us that we get better yields from early planting.

“But early planting can be challenging. Although we do not plant into wet soils, spring weather can often turn cool and wet. When that happens, soybeans can grow slowly, which makes them more susceptible to naturally occurring soil disease populations. We need to do something to protect that soybean seedling until it gets up and going.

“Research has also shown that you can get by with lower soybean seeding rates if you protect them with a seed treatment that will help reduce seedling mortality. In the past, we overplanted soybeans to ensure that we have an adequate stand for optimal yield. I bet you can remember when we planted 200,000 to 230,000 seeds per acre to

get a final plant population of 125,000 to 150,000 plants per acre.

“Today, it is common for growers to plant soybeans at 130,000 to 150,000 seeds per acre. The seed treatments allow every bean to come up at about the same time. In reality, better yielding varieties and better seed treatments mean we can use less seed per acre, which more than offsets the cost of the seed treatment.

“The idea is to protect your investment in the seed and yield. When you save money by planting less seed per acre, then you want to make sure that the highest number of those planted seeds emerge. Seed treatments are one of the ways to make sure you protect your investment.”

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# ANSWERING CUSTOMER QUESTIONS ABOUT *Fertilizers*



## KEEP TRACK OF NEW QUESTIONS

Chances are, this publication didn't answer every frequently asked question your customers will ask. The Appendix on page 58 is a form you can use to record new questions and possible answers. Share those answers with your employees.



**B**elow are some frequently asked questions (and possible answers) about fertilizers. Do you know how you would answer these questions?

**Question:** “How come I read in the newspaper that I can purchase nitrogen, potash, and phosphate for a price that is a few dollars less than what you are selling yours for?”



**Possible Answer:** “A lot of factors go into price. One of the biggest differences is the value that we bring to the table. You have freight from where you will pick it up back to your farm. Do you have fertilizer tanks and pumps to haul and apply liquid fertilizer? Do you have covered storage over a fertilizer pad with your own cart to apply dry fertilizer?”

“We also put monitors on our anhydrous ammonia toolbars. And when you ask, one of our agronomists will always come out to look at your fields. There has to be value put on these services. That’s all figured in to how we price our fertilizer. I hope you appreciate all of the little things we do for you, and, if there’s something we’re not doing for you, please let us know.”

**Question:** “How come you’re having me put on so much plow down when in years past we didn’t put that much on? We used to put on 200 pounds of potash per acre and 100 pounds of phosphate per acre and life was good. Now what you are telling me is to put on 250-300 pounds of potash and 150 pounds of phosphate per acre. Are you just trying to sell more fertilizer?”

**Possible Answer:** “We follow the recommendations that were developed, in part, by Purdue University [or the name of your land-grant university] specialists. Our recommendations are based on the soil nutrient levels from samples of your fields, plus estimates of nutrient removal by the crops grown in previous years. If a soil test is low in a field, then we add some P and K to build the soil up, plus some to replace crop removal. If the soil test is OK, then we just add enough of each nutrient to maintain the soil test level.





“The main reason we add more now is that our yields are higher than ever. You are now producing 200-bushel corn and 60-bushel beans. It takes more fertilizer to keep the soil where it’s at than when you were raising 150-bushel corn and 45-bushel beans. We want to maintain the levels so that we don’t deplete soil nutrients, and you can maximize your yields from this ground.



“That’s why we recommend soil sampling to all growers. We need a starting point to work from rather than a guess. Yes, you pay to get the soil samples taken, but most of the time the cost is more than offset by a needed lime recommendation or the right P and K recommendation, as well as increased yields from the right fertilizer recommendation if soil tests are low.

If soil tests are high, then we may be able to reduce your overall fertilizer recommendation. Either way, a soil test provides us better information to base a recommendation on.”

**Possible Answer:** “First of all, let me assure you that we follow the recommendations developed from years of field research by Purdue University

[or the name of your land-grant university] researchers. Fertilizer recommendations have always been based on the results of soil sampling that estimates whether soil nutrient levels in a field can adequately provide for the crop’s nutritional needs. That fertilizer recommendation gradually decreases as soil nutrient levels increase over time.



“At the same time, fertilizer recommendations include the replacement of the nutrients removed by the grain you harvest, so that your soil test levels do not drop below the ‘adequate’ level. Since yields today are higher than those years ago, the crop removes more nutrients from the field and that component of your fertilizer recommendation has increased. Let me arrange a time for you to talk about this in more detail with our company agronomist. I can also put you in contact with the soil fertility specialist at Purdue [or name of your land-grant university].”





**Question:** “How come you won’t spray my field with 28% or chemicals, yet I see your competitor spraying my neighbors. Don’t you appreciate my business?”



Why don’t you want to take care of me like they are taking care of them?”

**Possible Answer:** “If your field doesn’t have a neighbor with a sensitive crop on the downwind side, then we might be able to get it sprayed. If your neighbor lives downwind and has a sensitive crop, then we can’t, because their property is as valuable as yours.

“There are certain places I spray that I don’t want to take a chance of damaging. The Purdue Driftwatch site ([www.driftwatch.org](http://www.driftwatch.org)) notifies me that there are sensitive crops near your fields. Your neighbors were concerned about their areas and took the effort to tell us. We want to make sure the winds are not blowing toward these sensitive crops to cause damage.”



**Follow-up Question:** “That’s great, but what does that have to do with 28%?”

**Possible Answer:** “We need to be careful with 28% and drift just the same because it can burn foliage if it moves off-target.”

**Question:** “Is the nitrogen still there after all these rains?”

**Possible Answer:** “That’s a tough question to answer without some follow-up. It always depends on the soil type, what type of nitrogen was applied, whether a nitrogen stabilizer was used, when it was applied, and the amount of rainfall.

“These and other factors can influence how much of the nitrogen you applied is still there for the corn plant. Taking a pre-sidedress nitrate test of the soil will help us understand what is still in the soil so we don’t have to guess. Let’s get you in touch with our agronomist to discuss this in more detail.”



**ANSWERING CUSTOMER QUESTIONS  
ABOUT *Fuel and Oil***



**KEEP TRACK OF NEW QUESTIONS**

Chances are, this publication didn't answer every frequently asked question your customers will ask. The Appendix on page 58 is a form you can use to record new questions and possible answers. Share those answers with your employees.



**B**elow are some frequently asked questions (and possible answers) about fuel. Do you know how you would answer these questions?

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**Question:** “I notice that the price of oil was down yesterday, but it seems like my costs with you just keep going up. How come you guys don’t ever seem to lower your fuel and oil prices?”

**Possible Answer:** “There are a lot of factors that affect prices on any given day. We try to buy our bulk supplies at favorable times, so we can offer you the best

possible prices. I know my manager has some contracts and tools to help you manage price volatility. I’d be glad to put you in touch with her.”



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**Question:** My [brand] tractor is supposed to require a proprietary lubricant. Do you offer that product?”

**Possible Answer:** “We work constantly to stay up-to-date with all the products that major manufacturers require. We’ve matched these specs and this product has been approved for your equipment. However, I know this is an area of concern for you. Let’s get [name of person] who can show you our products and the proprietary products side-by-side and make sure the specs are the same or better on what I’m providing you.”

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## VIEW GROWER COMPLAINTS AS *Market Intelligence*



**H**andling customer complaints is an essential aspect of the service you provide. Successfully dealing with a complaint means working through a negotiation between two parties. The complaining party comes in with a perceived notion of what he or she wants. The retailer goes into the negotiation with a perceived idea of what he or she expects to get out of it. But through the negotiation process, a fair resolution is achieved. The process works best when both parties work toward resolving the problem first, and then settling on the resolution.





*Pearl of Wisdom*

*A* complaining customer made right  
is more loyal than an untroubled one.

A complaint can actually be your best friend. If you are looking for market intelligence, look at your common complaints. This “inside information” can help you identify your weaknesses, which you can learn from, and then turn them into your strengths. More important, complaints allow you to turn angry customers into satisfied customers. Research is clear: complaining customers who are dealt with fairly and have their issues resolved are more loyal than customers who have never had problems or complaints.



When it comes to successfully handling customer complaints, it is crucial that you:

- **Encourage customers to tell you when they have concerns.**
- **Encourage your front-line staff to tell management about customer concerns.** Most front-line staff are afraid they will be blamed, fired, or somehow disliked if they report complaints to their supervisors. Management has to make it safe for them by convincing/educating them they should listen to complaints and communicate the complaints to management.
- **Develop a system to regularly compile and review complaints.** Dealing correctly with complaints is as important as answering general questions about production. How you handle the complaint can make the difference between keeping a customer, or losing her to the competition. It can mean solving a problem with a neighbor or having him or her file a complaint with state authorities.

When you first receive a complaint, consider these 13 points.



## 1. Thank Customers for Bringing the Matter to Your Attention

You hate to get information second-hand from another grower who heard it at the local coffee shop. Always say, “I’m glad you brought this to my attention. I know we pride ourselves in providing good service. Once we know there are problems, we can correct them. I’ll let the manager know immediately.”



*It would be nice if all customers were completely satisfied with the advice, products, and services you offer. While that is always the goal, it never happens in the real world. Dealing with complaints is part of doing business. How you handle them can set you apart from the competition.*



## 2. Tell the Manager or Agronomist About the Situation

Tell your manager, no matter how minor the complaint may seem to you. If something concerns your customer, then it’s important

enough to address. If the customer contacts you with a complaint, then obviously he or she is concerned about it right then, not a week later.

Let your manager know as soon as possible if a customer complains about something the local branch did or did not do. You are busy and so is your manager, but don’t delay. Practice 100 percent follow-up on even the smallest complaints or problems.

One response might be, “Those are good questions. Let me have the manager call you, because he’s probably in a better position to answer them.” If you let the customer keep asking, the customer’s comments may become more complicated than you are comfortable with or have the authority to discuss or resolve.



## 3. Make the Customers’ Complaints Personal

The problem isn’t just your customer’s, it’s yours, too. Saying “I’m sorry about the way you feel” is different than saying, “I’m sorry about the problem we caused.” You can be sorry without being at fault. That will come out later if, in fact, you or your company caused the problem.



## 4. Appreciate the Concerns

Let your customers know that you will treat their concerns with respect and dignity. Think about your customers' positions and opinions. Be objective, positive, and honest when dealing with your customers' concerns. That kind of interest makes them realize you're not just in it for the dollars, but are looking after their best interests.

## 5. Don't Make Excuses Over the Phone

Making excuses is never positive in any relationship. Say the wrong thing on the phone and the negotiation is skewed from the outset. Phone conversations do not allow you to see facial expressions or body language that can be so critical to understanding the totality of the complaint. If you are defensive, it can lead to the complaint being even louder. It is best to offer the opportunity for your manager or agronomist to stop by as soon as he or she is able.



*The farmer of this field mixed up non-Roundup Ready® corn with a bag of Roundup Ready® corn. When the retailer sprayed the field, the non-GMO corn died immediately. In this example, the farmer picked up the tab for the damage.*

## 6. Never Admit Guilt Until You've Seen the Problem

You don't know what a person's intentions are when he or she first voices her complaint. Admitting guilt has serious legal and financial ramifications. You can't know until you see for yourself first-hand.



*There is no substitute for seeing the problem first-hand. It might be the only way to figure out what went wrong.*

## 7. Do Not Mention Insurance Over the Phone

Complaints must be investigated first and negotiations concluded before any mention of insurance occurs. The goal is to determine the facts behind a complaint regardless of where the financial restitution or solution will come from. Just the mention of insurance may have your customers believe that their complaints will result in an insurance payment. The results of many complaints do not end with the insurance payment, because there is no justification once you investigate the issue.





## 8. Review Before Investigating

Do your homework and be prepared before you go with your manager or agronomist to resolve a customer's issue.

For example, let's say you need to investigate a complaint about a pesticide application. Always check your application records before arriving at the site. Determine whether you or another custom applicator treated the field, what products were used, what adjustments (if any) were made, and other notes you may have written on the work order. See when the fertilizer was applied, the rates, and conditions. Know which hybrids were planted and the timing. Check the weather conditions that occurred before and after the applications were made. Review logs and notes, and speak to any company staff who might have contacted the customer. Make copies and bring them to the field to help support your opinions.



*Note the environmental conditions and operational procedures for any job. This will create a "paper trail" that will help if you need to investigate a complaint.*



## 9. Respond in a Timely Manner

You can sometimes schedule meetings with customers at later times. However, with neighbor complaints, the time to act is now. Drop everything you are doing to go see the neighbor and see if you might have caused a problem. If so, then your manager can make or authorize restitution.



## 10. Remain Cool, Calm, and Collected

There are times when a complaint will be emotionally charged. Keep your composure no matter what happens. If you match your customer's anger with emotion of your own, it has a tendency to worsen the problem. If you need to take a time out, simply explain that you're worried that you may seem angry and would like a chance to give some thought how best to address your customer's concern.

## 11. Don't Make Promises You Can't Keep

Leave the promises to those who have the authority to resolve problems and complaints. You can often buy yourself some time or leeway by telling customers that you'd like to check into some solutions. When customers have concerns, they want you to listen to them first, and then they want solutions. There is a natural break between these two needs that will allow you to give some thought to how you want to respond instead of feeling pressured into making promises that you'll regret later.

## 12. Speak When Asked to Respond

When you deal with a complaint, there may be more than one person visiting the site. This on-site visit with the customer will allow the local branch to determine what the problem is and what the company will and will not do to resolve it. If you are not the one involved in deciding who is at fault, then don't speak until you are asked to do so. Volunteering information that is not needed could complicate matters.

## 13. Avoid Speculation

Do not attempt to answer questions about things you did or did not do, unless the manager or agronomist asks you to do so. Treat this visit as if you were in court. Honestly answer the questions posed to you. If you're not sure what you are being asked, then request the question to be clarified for you. Repeat back what you think you're being asked before answering. Try to get to the specific question so you can provide the most accurate answer. Make sure you only provide facts, and not opinions or intentions. Always be truthful. ✨



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# RESPONDING TO *Customer Complaints*



## KEEP TRACK OF NEW COMPLAINTS

Chances are, this publication didn't come up with every complaint your customers will have. The Appendix on page 58 is a form you can use to record new complaints and possible responses. Share those answers with your employees.

*Your customers are concerned about the high price of inputs and it's reasonable for them to ask questions about any price. You have to be able to explain how every dollar they spend on a specific input will result in a positive outcome.*



**B**elow are some frequent complaints you may hear from customers. Do you know how you would respond?

**Complaint:** “You’re not the cheapest? Why should I buy from you?”

**Possible Response:** “Sometimes, our products cost more, sometimes they cost less. I’m not sure of all the details of the service we promised, but I know we’ve been trying to make sure we focus on value for our customers more than price. We may not have the cheapest price out there, but we know you do not want the lowest performance either, and those things often go hand-in-hand. Our salespeople try to match the value they bring with the needs of customers. I bet your salesperson would be happy to talk with you about ways we could help reduce your input costs.”



*When you provide great advice and higher yields at reasonable returns, you gain long-term customers.*



**Complaint:** “There’s some pretty serious damage to that corn you sprayed. It just looks absolutely stunted. Do you think you guys will pay for it if I call it in to the branch manager?”

**Possible Response:** “Why don’t you let us take a look, check out the problem, and then talk about what we need to do to remedy the situation. I can have my crop specialist and branch manager come out, look at the symptoms, and try to diagnose the injury. Let’s give them a call to see when they can look at the field with you.”





**Possible Response:** “First, let’s diagnose the cause of the problem together. Let me send out our agronomist to take a look at the field. We’ll need your crop records including any herbicides you applied yourself this year or last year. I will also look up our records here at the plant for any applications we did for you this year and last year.”



*No one would argue that it costs a lot to plant, manage, and harvest a crop. However, you must be able to show customers how the cost of each input will increase their yields and offset their costs.*



**Complaint:** “I’m combining the 200-acre field next to the church, and the weeds are really thick! I’m sure those weeds cost me some yield. What are you going to do about that since I paid you to spray those fields?”



**Possible Response:** “Was the whole field weedy or just spots? This late in the season, it’s tough to pinpoint the problem, but let’s have the agronomist look at it and double-check our spray records and the weather at the time of application. Let’s call the manager to let him know about this field.”

**Possible Response:** “First of all, let me send out our agronomist right now to take a look at

what you are dealing with while you are still harvesting that field. That will allow us to better evaluate the situation. Then, let me check our application records here to verify when we were in your field and whether our applicator made any notes that day. Based on what we see in your field, our application records, the weed species causing the problem, and weather records, we will work with you to figure out the cause of the problem.”





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**Complaint:** “This [corn, soybean] doesn’t look right. I think something’s wrong with it. It’s come up spotty and what is up looks yellow. What can you do about it, since I bought the seed from your company?”



**Possible Response:** “Are you going to be around today so we can come out and take a look? That’s the best way for us to determine what the problem is.”

**Something to Think About:** With any seed problem, make certain to check which hybrids your customer purchased. Before you go out to see the fields, know what your alternatives are going to be if the specific hybrids are unavailable. This is important in case you agree to provide seed for replant. Knowing what you have to offer will help you avoid promising something you can’t deliver.



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**Complaint:** “Every time I get a bill from you guys, it seems like it’s all screwed up!”



**Possible Response:** “I understand your concern. Why don’t you come to the office with the bills that you are upset with and let us take a look at them with you?”

**Something to Think About:** It is best not to shift the blame to your company’s bookkeepers. Without the facts, you really don’t know if there is a problem or not. Be sure to contact your bookkeepers to let them know about the billing problem. This will allow your company’s staff to collect all the documents and to review what was billed to the customer.



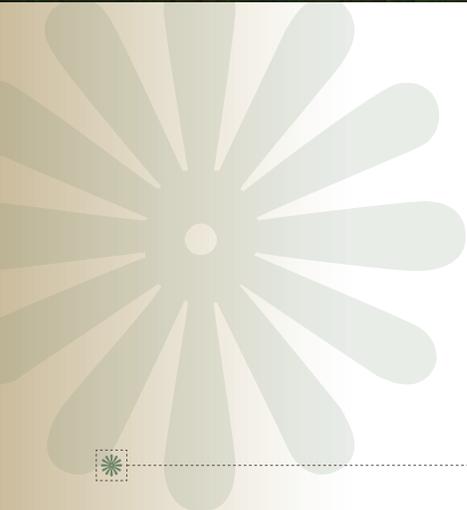


# **RESPONDING TO** *Neighbor Complaints*



## **KEEP TRACK OF NEW COMPLAINTS**

Chances are, this publication didn't come up with every complaint a neighbor may have. The Appendix on page 58 is a form you can use to record new complaints and possible responses. Share those answers with your employees.





**B**elow are some frequent complaints you may hear from neighbors. Do you know how you would respond to these questions?

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**Complaint:** “I have damage on my shrubs, garden, and trees. I saw you spraying in the field next to my home. What are you going to do about it?”

**Possible Response:** “Are you available today for us to take a look at what you’re seeing? I’ll ask my manager or agronomist to see what their schedules look like. I’ll call you back after I check with them. Will that work for you?”

**Something to Think About:** The worst things to say to a neighbor with a complaint like this is “I didn’t do it,” “I can’t come out right now,” or “I’m sorry we damaged your property.” This only irritates people and makes it harder to deal with them later. In the case of an admission, it may even mean your company has to pay for something that was not really your fault.



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**Complaint:** “The leaves on my fruit trees are all twisted. This is the fourth year this has happened and it happens every time you spray. I’m tired of your drift on my property. I want you to pay for the damages, or I will file a complaint with the state and then sue you in court.”

**Possible Response:** “I can understand that you’re upset about your trees. It’s your right to file a complaint with the state or file a lawsuit. However, I would like to look further into the situation to see if it was caused by our application. I’d be glad to send some samples to Purdue [or your local land-grant college] to help identify the problem. We can look at our records and application data. Why don’t we have someone who has more knowledge than me come out and look? I would like to get my manager on the phone. Can you hold off a day so he can discuss and investigate the concern you are raising?”





**Something to Think About:** In situations like this, it is critical to let your manager know about the problem as soon as possible.

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**Complaint** (*when the neighbor flags you down when you're working*): “Hold up buddy. Will this stuff hurt my children, pets, and yard? Also, my mother lives with us and she has asthma and is 85 years old. How will this affect her?”

**Possible Response:** “I appreciate your concerns. We always make sure that we keep the product on the field, so it should not pose a risk to you or your family. Would it be helpful if we told you when we were going to treat the field next to your property? I am sure my manager will work with me on this.”

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**Complaint:** “Look what you did to my pond! You killed my fish!”

**Possible Response:** “I am sorry that your fish have died. There are many factors that contribute to fish dying in a pond. During this time of year the most common cause of fish kills is low oxygen levels in the water that suffocate the fish. Let me call my manager and agronomist so they can come out and look at the pond.”

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**Complaint:** “I spoke with the farmer and he told me to call you. He said since you sprayed the field you are responsible for the damages on my property.”

**Possible Response:** “We always take responsibility for our actions. What is the damage that you are referring to, and when did it occur? I can't really offer much more than to help gather information at this moment. I'll need to check our office records to see what information we have on that field. Is it all right with you if I call my manager to inform him you have damage to your property that you believe to be from us?”



*A neighbor complained that the applicator caused drift damage to these spruce trees. However, after a closer investigation, cold damage was determined to be the cause, not herbicide injury.*





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**Complaint:** “My cat and dog walk in my neighbor’s field. I would rather not have it sprayed so that they are not poisoned with what you spray.”



**Possible Response:**

“It would be best if you do not allow your pets onto that field at all. It belongs to someone else who must run heavy equipment during the spring and fall. I would not want your pets injured. We are not able to see your pets as the crop grows taller.”

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**Complaint:** “My daughter is getting married here two weeks from today. Is there any way you could hold off spraying [or spreading] that field during that time?”

**Possible Response:** “Congratulations. That seems like it’s a doable request. Let me talk to the farmer and my manager to see what we can do to accommodate your wishes. I’ll call you back as soon as I hear back from the both of them. Will that be all right with you?”

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**Complaint:** “Do I need to leave my house when you spray?”

**Possible Response:** “No. Our job is to put the material in the field and nowhere else. But if you feel comfortable elsewhere, spraying will only take a few minutes.”

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**Complaint:** “You guys damaged my garden the last time you sprayed. I did not complain to you, but I’m tired of it. I don’t want to file a complaint, but if you damage the garden this year, I’ll be forced to do so.”

**Possible Response:** “I am sorry that your garden was damaged. While I have no way of seeing last year’s damage, we will do everything possible not to drift on your property. I will call my manager right now and let them know about your garden so that we have it in our records. I will also report it on my work order. I appreciate your willingness to tell us about your concern. Now, where is your garden so that all of us can watch for it.”



# CONCLUSION: WHAT YOU *Say* MATTERS AS MUCH AS WHAT YOU *Do*



*Educational programs at university or company field days offer opportunities to keep informed about the latest information that can improve your customers' production practices. Ongoing training for you and your employees can keep you one step ahead of your competitors and customers.*



In the past, if you provided good customer service your business had a better chance to thrive. But good customer service isn't enough anymore. The bar has been raised so high that in order to succeed, you cannot just be good, you must be exceptional. You can deliver great customer service by doing small things really well.

Taking the time to answer a grower's question or deal with his or her complaint fairly is an important part of any retail business. Customers want the best for their businesses just like you want the best for yours. This is why agricultural retail employees need to make sure that all of their customers' questions are answered to the best of their abilities.



When employees answer their customers' concerns and complaints well, the payoff comes when the customer continues buying products from the retailer. Customers recognize good service and your personal commitment to do the best job possible. How your employees present themselves to your customers, and how they communicate with customers influences what customers think about your company. If all employees are results-oriented, customers will understand that they matter to you. ✨



*Each farming operation — large or small — needs and expects different things from their agricultural retailers.*



# APPENDIX

Chances are, this publication didn't answer every frequently asked question and complaint you'll hear from your customers. Use this form to record new questions or complaints and your possible answers or responses. Share those answers with your employees. Additional copies of this form are available from the Purdue Pesticide Programs website at [www.ppp.purdue.edu](http://www.ppp.purdue.edu).

Please share your questions and answers by emailing them to Fred Whitford: [fwhitford@purdue.edu](mailto:fwhitford@purdue.edu). If we use the question, we'll add it as an anonymous addendum to the publication on our website: [www.ppp.purdue.edu](http://www.ppp.purdue.edu).

## Question/Complaint:

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## Possible Answer/Response:

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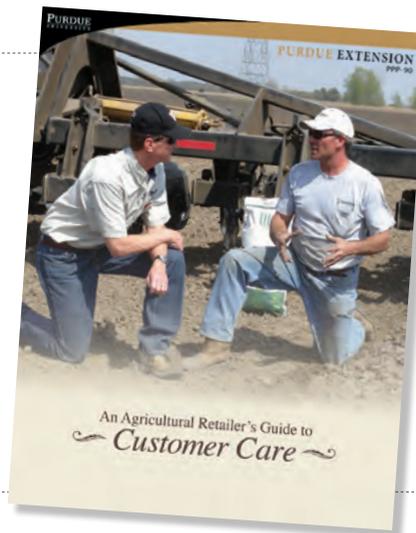
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## FIND OUT MORE

Purdue Pesticide Programs offer a number of publications on related topics to help you manage your operations better. All publications are available from The Purdue Extension Education Store:

[www.the-education-store.com](http://www.the-education-store.com)  
(888) EXT-INFO (496-4636)



Every customer should have a face, so you should know each one well enough to target his or her expectations. *An Agricultural Retailer's Guide to Customer Care* (PPP-90) describes the things customers want from their retailers and offers strategies retailers can follow to improve customer loyalty.





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