Handling an angry customer: a hospitality conversation example

A difficult guest conversation becomes easier to manage when staff know their authority and their exit from the interaction. Agree which remedies a team member can offer, when a manager takes over and how help is requested. Listen for the practical problem, speak at a steady pace and use short choices that can actually be delivered. Maintain a safe position and avoid crowding the person.

UK verbal communication and safe escalation awareness; physical intervention and SIA training are separate.

The practical principles

Notice a change early

A raised voice, crowding, repeated demands or clenched fists can indicate rising tension. Consider your position, the available exit and nearby colleagues. Keep a comfortable distance and an open route away. An agitated person may also have a communication difficulty or need help. Respond to the behaviour you can observe and ask a simple question about what they need.

Speak clearly and offer choices

Use a steady voice, short sentences and one speaker where possible. Acknowledge the concern and explain what you can do within your authority. For example: “I can ask the duty manager to check the bill with you.” Allow time for a response. Set a clear boundary about threatening behaviour and offer a practical next step. Avoid arguing about who deserves respect or making promises you cannot keep.

Use the support plan

When a situation escalates, move to safety, summon the designated supervisor or security team and use the emergency procedure for immediate danger. Your role determines whether you should remain involved. Physical restraint is outside this course. After the incident, record the observable facts and report any threats or injury. Ask for support after a distressing encounter and flag recurring problems with staffing or the service process.

Work through a shift scenario

Fictional exercise: a guest loudly demands a refund for a delayed meal. The server can acknowledge the delay, explain that the duty manager can discuss the remedy and ask a colleague to bring them over. If the guest threatens the server or blocks their movement, the priority changes to withdrawing and getting assistance. Staff should not remain in a threatening conversation simply to complete the complaint process.

Avoid the common failure

Promises outside a staff member’s authority can create a second dispute. Rehearse an honest boundary and a supported handover. Afterwards, check the colleague’s welfare and record relevant behaviour using observed words or actions. Physical intervention is outside this verbal-awareness guide.

A second situation to discuss

Fictional scenario: A guest blocks the till exit and shouts about a missing booking. You are the only person at the desk.

Prioritise space and a safe route, use the agreed assistance signal and call a colleague or security. Offer to have the booking checked from a safe position. If there is immediate danger, use the emergency response. Record the incident once safe.

Use a working record

Record the specific arrangements below before the briefing. Keep the wording short enough for a colleague to use during the shift. Where a field does not apply, explain why; where information is missing, assign a person to resolve it. Store personal or sensitive details in the business's approved system.

- Guest concern
- options within authority
- help signal
- safe withdrawal route
- handover recipient
- factual incident record

At the next handover, ask what changed, which action remains open and who now owns it. Close the record only when the agreed follow-up is complete. A recurring problem should inform the next briefing and the relevant operational procedure.

Check understanding

A useful early action is:

Check your route to safety Position and access to help affect your safety.

Which wording is useful?

I can ask the manager to check that A concrete option helps focus the conversation.

De-escalation practice: two staff give a guest different answers

One colleague has refused entry. A second starts debating the reason with the guest in a crowded doorway. Voices rise. How could the team reduce pressure?

Compare your decision

Agree one staff contact, keep a safe distance and give the guest space to respond. State the decision and available next step calmly. Follow the venue's support procedure if risk increases; move other guests away from the confrontation where safe.

Practise a handover that does not restart the argument. "I'll stay with the queue; Sam will explain the duty manager's review process" gives each person a clear role.

Sources and scope

- Source: https://www.hse.gov.uk/violence/
- Source: https://www.hse.gov.uk/lone-working/employer/index.htm

Original workplace examples and suggested record. Prepared 19 October 2026. Use the current linked guidance and the venue's procedures for operational decisions.

Use this on shift

Resource page and fillable working record · Read the online guide · Course details