



Vulnerable Customers

Until recently, Jan was an extremely lively, capable and outgoing person. But when her partner died unexpectedly, her world turned upside down.

After the initial shock, she went through a series of emotions as she tried to come to terms with her grief. She wasn't sleeping well, often found it hard to concentrate, and she felt emotionally and physically drained.

While all this was going on she also had to sort out her partner's affairs and deal with everyday things like renewing insurance policies, paying the bills, and making ends meet.

Derek's been feeling anxious at work for some time now, he's had a couple of bad performance reviews and he's worried that he might lose his job. His doctor's put him on some anti-depressant medication which seems to be working, but it makes him feel tired, weak and listless. His lack of energy and enthusiasm has put a strain on his long term relationship and he's become irritable and withdrawn.

Kimberley's been diagnosed with the early stage Alzheimer's and her condition will get progressively worse. At the moment, she sometimes has trouble making decisions and finding the right words.

The term vulnerable customer is used to describe someone who due to their personal circumstances, is especially susceptible to detriment, particularly when an organisation is not acting with appropriate levels of care, and although Kimberly, Derek and Jan may not think of themselves as being vulnerable, they'd probably recognise that they aren't as able to cope as well as they had been before.

Personal circumstances fall broadly into three categories:

A person's health, both mental and physical, as well as any disabilities they may have.

Their levels of literacy, numeracy and language skills.



And also whether they're going through a significant life changing event such as a job loss, a divorce, or a bereavement.

Often it's a number of factors working together that makes someone particularly vulnerable.

Grace had a short term loan and credit card repayments which she was just about managing to pay each month. When she found out that she had cancer and would need treatment, she realised that she'd be off work for some time and there'd be a loss of income which would make her financial position even more critical.

She contacted her bank to let them know about her situation but instead of talking her through her options, they told her to call back when her account was in arrears - which she felt just made, what was already a stressful situation, even worse.

Here's another example of when a company didn't take a customer's personal situation into account.

Larry was admitted into hospital when he broke his ankle. He has a degenerative illness which means that it will take much longer for his ankle to heal than normal and the hospital staff weren't able to say how long it would be before he could go home.

Larry asked his son to go round and check on his house while he was in hospital, and during one visit, his son discovered that the house had been broken into, and a number of valuable items had been stolen.

Larry rang the insurers but was told that they wouldn't be paying the claim as, strictly speaking, the house had been unoccupied for more than 30 days.

Larry didn't think this was fair and made a complaint to the ombudsman. Here are some of the points they made in their findings:

Larry's accident was unplanned
he'd asked his son to visit



the hospital hadn't been able to say when he would be fit enough to return home especially as Larry lives alone and would need to be able to look after himself.

They said that businesses sometimes apply rules and procedures too rigidly and without taking into account the extent of a customer's vulnerability. And Larry's complaint was upheld.

So what can organisations do to be supportive of customers who find themselves in a vulnerable position and need more care?

Frontline staff need to be able to identify vulnerable customers and adopt a sensitive approach.

A good part of any customer service is treating customers in a way which is flexible enough to meet the needs of the individual. This may involve using an amount of discretion so staff need to know where they can go for internal help and expertise, and also when to refer a customer to an external organisation. Look at this

As far as the water company was concerned, Geoff wasn't a good customer. He had a long history of failing to pay his bills and ignoring contacts, he'd had two court judgements against him and he owed them over £900.

He was about to be served court papers again, but this time, when the server visited Geoff he let him know about a debt charity.

Geoff got in touch with them and they helped him to put together a repayment plan and get his finances back on track. As a result he's been able to start making payments to the water company and repay the money he owes.

Not all vulnerable customers will see themselves as being vulnerable, and staff may have to take the lead. This could be as simple as suggesting to a customer that they go to a quiet area to talk about a sensitive issue, or reassuring someone that there's no rush and they can take as long as they need to explain what happened to them.



There are all sorts of situations and events that can mean a customer is in a vulnerable position, and needs more care than usual, and you may well have a family member, or know someone, in this situation.

Being able to identify vulnerable customers and respond appropriately, will help to ensure that they're treated fairly, and as individuals.