

Customer Service Notes for *WIC*

What to Say When You Can't Say Yes!

Employees in any service industry often need to give negative or “bad news” to their customers, who may make requests that are unrealistic, against policy, or just not feasible. This is no different for WIC staff, who may not always be able to provide participants what they ask for.

One of the tried and true principles of customer service is to tell clients what you can do and not dwell on what you can't. For example, suppose Mrs. Santana, a WIC participant, calls and insists on getting an appointment the next day. After looking at your clinic's schedule, you find that you are already overbooked and there are no openings. Rather than saying “I'm sorry, Mrs. Santana, we have no openings tomorrow,” it would be better to say “I'm sorry Mrs. Santana, we are completely booked tomorrow. However, we could see you the day after. Would a morning appointment then work for you?” This approach offers an option and de-emphasizes the fact that you cannot meet her request.

When you are delivering a negative response to a WIC participant in person, be sure to use positive body language and make eye contact. Don't fold your arms, put your hands on your hips, or roll your eyes. Sometimes we do this without realizing we are doing so. You can also start your sentence with a word or phrase such as “Unfortunately,” “I wish we could...,” or “I'd like to be able to ...” In addition, you should apologize for being unable to meet the request. We sometimes see employees who won't apologize because they feel it's an admission that they have done something wrong.

When you are on the phone with a participant and need to give negative news, it is especially important that you use a calm tone of voice. Without seeing your eye contact and positive body language, the participant needs to hear a pleasant, helpful voice.

Of course, we know that some participants will not react well to the negative news and may become upset and raise their voice. When this happens, it is critical that you not raise your voice. Instead, you should lower your voice, since by doing so, you may be able to get the participant to lower hers. (Elementary school teachers are taught this technique when dealing with loud misbehaving students.)

One final note, be careful when making exceptions to WIC policies and procedures in order to give a participant what they are asking for. In doing so, you may be violating a WIC policy. Remember to check with a supervisor before granting an exception for a participant.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you focus on what you can do for participants rather than dwelling on what you can't do for them?
2. Do you use a calm tone of voice when conveying negative news to participants?
3. Are you mindful of your body language and eye contact when conveying negative news?

