

From detractor to promoter

Case-study approaches to saving
the customers you've already lost.

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Introduction

The customer who left you a 2/10 last Tuesday is not lost. In most cases, they have not yet decided to leave; they have decided to tell you they are upset. The window between those two events — between the moment they signal distress and the moment they quietly stop buying — is where customer recovery actually happens. It is usually shorter than CX teams assume and longer than the customer wants it to be.

This paper is a tactical playbook for that window. It is structured around five archetypal cases we encounter again and again in client engagements — different kinds of detractor, each requiring a different recovery move. It is short on theory and long on what the person on the receiving end of the complaint should actually do.

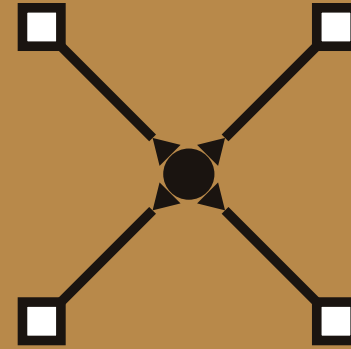
Recovery is not the same as appeasement. A detractor can be soothed without being saved — many programmes do this every day. The difference is whether the underlying cause is removed, the relationship is repaired, and the customer's next score (or next purchase) actually moves. That is the test we use throughout this paper.

What you'll get:

- A four-cause taxonomy of why customers become detractors
- A working calculation of what saving one detractor is worth
- Five archetypal cases — situation, root cause, recovery move, outcome
- A five-step recovery playbook the frontline can execute today
- What converts a detractor versus what hardens them further
- Five output metrics of a working recovery programme
- Six recovery mistakes that look helpful but make things worse

Who this is for:

- CX directors building or rebuilding a recovery programme
- Heads of service and account leaders on the receiving end
- Frontline managers responsible for individual save calls
- Anyone whose detractor follow-up is now a checkbox, not a save



Chapter 1

Why detractors exist

Four root causes — almost every detractor fits one

Detractors are not a homogeneous group. Across roughly forty client deployments, almost every detractor we have studied traces back to one of four root causes. The recovery move depends on which one — applying the wrong remedy to the right complaint is the most common recovery failure.

1. Failed delivery. Something went wrong at the moment of truth — a delayed shipment, a broken product, a botched implementation. The customer expected X and got Y. The complaint is acute, the cause is specific, and the remedy is usually fixable.

2. Process friction. Nothing acute went wrong, but every interaction costs the customer more effort than it should. Long hold times, repeated identification, channel switching, forms re-filled. The complaint is diffuse, the cause is structural, the remedy is operational.

3. Mismatched expectations. What you sold them is not what they thought they were buying. Sometimes that is a marketing problem, sometimes a sales problem, sometimes a product-fit problem. The complaint sounds like a quality issue but the cause is upstream.

4. Relational neglect. Nothing is broken; the customer just feels invisible. No acknowledgement of tenure, no proactive contact, no recognition when they raised the previous issue. The complaint is emotional, the cause is in how you treat them — not what you do for them.

The diagnostic question

Before the recovery call, ask yourself: which of the four categories does this customer fit into? The wrong category leads to the wrong remedy. A relational neglect case offered a refund feels insulted; a failed delivery case offered an apology and no remedy feels patronised.



Chapter 2

The economics

What is one detractor actually worth?

Recovery programmes get under-funded because the value of saving one customer is rarely calculated. Most CX teams know it matters; few can put a number on it. The working formula below produces a defensible per-customer figure that the CFO will accept.

Working formula

Recovery value = $(\Delta\text{churn} \times \text{ARPA} \times \text{margin} \times \text{residual life}) + \text{avoided CAC} + \text{recovered referral value}$.

Δchurn is the difference between a detractor's churn rate and a passive customer's churn rate. ARPA is annual revenue per account. Margin is the contribution margin per account. Residual life is the remaining tenure if they had stayed. Avoided CAC is the cost of replacing them through paid acquisition. Recovered referral value comes from the fact that a saved detractor often becomes a promoter.

Worked example

A mid-market B2B service. 18% of customers are detractors. Detractor churn is 24%; passive churn is 9%. $\Delta\text{churn} = 15\%$. ARPA = €6,200. Margin = 58%. Residual life if saved = 4 years.

Recovery value per detractor saved $\approx 0.15 \times 6,200 \times 0.58 \times 4 = \text{€}2,160$ in retained margin. Avoided CAC of €420. Referral lift estimated at €180. Total $\approx \text{€}2,760$ per saved detractor.

The implication

If a single recovery call costs €40 of frontline time and one in three calls successfully converts the detractor, your effective cost per save is €120 against a value of €2,760. That is a 23x return — and it almost never gets calculated, which is why recovery programmes stay under-resourced.



Chapter 3

Five archetypes

Cases 1 — 3

Five recurring patterns of detractor. Each case has the same shape: the situation, the root cause it traces back to, the recovery move that worked, and the outcome. The cases are composite — anonymised and stitched from real engagements — but they are not made up.

The Disappointed Loyalist

CASE

The situation

A long-tenure B2B client, eight years with the company, fully embedded. An onboarding for a new business unit went badly — three missed deadlines and a botched data migration. NPS went from +9 to -5 in a quarter.

Root cause

Failed delivery. The team running the new BU implementation was different from the one running the existing relationship and had no context about the customer's tenure.

Recovery move

Owner stepped in personally within 4 hours of the survey. Took ownership of the delivery, brought the implementation lead onto the next call. Offered a fee credit, not as compensation but as a signal of seriousness.

Outcome

Customer converted to promoter within 60 days. Re-bought the BU engagement at expansion price. Now an active reference.

The Forgotten Customer

CASE

The situation

A mid-tier retail customer, eleven years of buying history. No acute problem — service quality had drifted down slowly. Latest NPS was a 4. The verbatim said "nothing wrong, just feels less special than it used to."

Root cause

Relational neglect. Account had been auto-renewed three years without contact. The CSM rotation had broken the relationship.

Recovery move

Account-management lead called personally — not to apologise, but to ask about the next twelve months and propose a quarterly review. Named a fixed CSM going forward.

Outcome

Score moved to 8 within one quarter. Cross-sell on adjacent product closed six months later. The recovery cost effectively nothing.

The Trapped Complainer

CASE

The situation

A consumer-services customer who had been bounced between four agents over six weeks trying to resolve a billing dispute. Last NPS: 0. Last verbatim was profane.

Root cause

Process friction. The complaint workflow forced channel switching and ID re-verification at every handoff. The customer was right and the system kept punishing them for it.

Recovery move

Single owner assigned with authority to resolve. One phone call, issue closed in 18 minutes. Customer also given a direct phone line for any future issue.

Outcome

Score moved to 9. Customer renewed at premium tier. The bigger win: the workflow itself was redesigned so the next thousand customers didn't hit the same wall.

Cases 4 — 5, and what the pattern tells us

The Mismatched Buyer

CASE

The situation

A SaaS customer six months in, NPS of 2. The product worked exactly as advertised — but the buyer had expected something it never claimed to be. The sales process had over-pitched on capability.

Root cause

Mismatched expectations. The cause was upstream, in sales. The customer was not wrong, but the product also was not at fault.

Recovery move

Honest conversation: what they needed was a complementary product (also in the company's portfolio) plus a smaller version of the current one. Sales team re-priced the package.

Outcome

Customer migrated to the right configuration, NPS recovered to 8 within one quarter. Sales team adjusted the discovery script — fewer mismatched deals overall.

The Public Voice

CASE

The situation

A retail customer who left a 1-star Google review and posted on social media after a return was refused. Reach: roughly 14,000 people in the first 48 hours. NPS via the recovery survey was 0.

Root cause

Failed delivery plus relational neglect. The return policy was applied correctly but communicated brutally; the customer felt treated as a fraud risk.

Recovery move

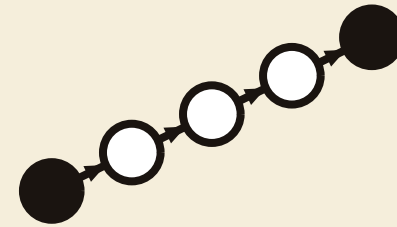
Senior service manager called within 4 hours, refunded the order, and asked if they could publish the resolution publicly. Customer agreed and updated the review themselves.

Outcome

Reputation impact contained. Customer not only stayed but became a vocal advocate. The bigger win was internal: the return-policy language was rewritten to be less adversarial.

What the five cases have in common

In every case, the recovery move was specific to the root cause — not generic. A loyalist needed ownership and acknowledgement. The forgotten customer needed relationship, not compensation. The trapped complainer needed authority, not empathy. The mismatched buyer needed a different product, not a smaller invoice. The public voice needed speed, transparency and the ability to update the public record themselves.



Chapter 4

The recovery playbook

Five moves, in order

The same five moves, in the same order, work across all four root causes. The only thing that changes is the content of each move. Frontline teams can execute this without training in CX theory — but they need explicit permission to skip none of the steps.

01 Acknowledge fast.

Within four hours, named human contact. Not a templated email. The acknowledgement does two things: it signals the issue is taken seriously, and it buys you the time to diagnose properly.

02 Diagnose the actual cause.

Do not jump to the remedy. Run a 3-Whys conversation to surface which of the four root causes this is. Most recovery failures are recoveries to the symptom, not the cause.

03 Offer the right remedy.

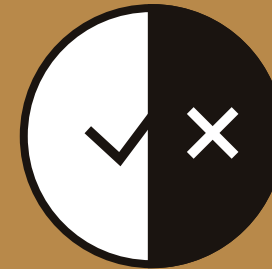
Match remedy to cause. Failed delivery → make it right. Process friction → bypass the friction for them. Mismatched expectations → reconfigure what they bought. Relational neglect → invest the relationship time, no compensation.

04 Verify the recovery landed.

Six to twelve weeks later, re-check the customer. Did the score move? Did behaviour change? Did the relationship feel different? If the answer is no, the cause was misidentified and the loop reruns.

05 Re-engage them as a voice.

A saved detractor is the most credible voice you have. Ask them to be a reference, contribute to a case study, or join a customer advisory board. Recovery without re-engagement leaves value on the table.



Chapter 5

What converts vs hardens

Recovery moves: side-by-side

Identical-looking situations produce opposite outcomes depending on the move chosen. The left column shows moves we have seen convert detractors into promoters. The right column shows moves we have seen harden them further — often more damaging than no recovery at all.

What converts

A named human within 4 hours.

Speed signals seriousness more than any wording in the message.

Authority on the call.

The person you speak with can actually fix the thing. No promises of "I'll have to check."

Acknowledgement of the cause, not just the complaint.

Naming what went wrong, in their language, before offering anything.

Remedy proportional to the cause.

Refund for failed delivery. Process bypass for friction. Reconfiguration for mismatch. Relationship for neglect.

Follow-up six weeks later.

Closing the loop with the customer — not just internally.

What hardens

Templated apology email.

Reads as a form letter; signals that you do not see them as a specific person.

Generic compensation as opening move.

Especially for relational cases — feels like a payoff to make them go away.

Channel ping-pong.

Bouncing them from chat to email to phone to a different agent. Each handoff is a fresh insult.

Asking them to fill another survey.

Closing the conversation with "please rate this interaction" — the worst possible end to a recovery call.

Closing the case without verifying.

Marking it resolved internally before the customer experiences the fix landing. The internal scoreboard goes up, the customer churns.



Chapter 6

Recovery metrics

Measure the output, not the activity

Recovery dashboards almost always measure activity — calls made, tickets closed. The metrics that prove the programme is working are different. A functioning recovery programme reports the five below on a single page, every month, to the executive sponsor.

1	Recovery rate Percentage of contacted detractors whose next score moves them out of the detractor band within 60 days.	TARGET >35% (>50% in mature programmes)
2	Time-to-first-touch Median hours from detractor score received to first named-human contact.	TARGET <4h (<2h for high-value accounts)
3	Detractor-to-promoter conversion Percentage of detractors whose next score lands in the promoter band (9-10).	TARGET >15% (the headline metric)
4	Re-purchase rate post-recovery Percentage of saved detractors who make a subsequent purchase within 12 months.	TARGET >70% (in line with passive-customer baseline)
5	Recovery-to-fix rate Percentage of recovered cases that also produced a structural fix preventing the next occurrence.	TARGET >25% (the outer-loop indicator)



Chapter 7

Six common mistakes

Six mistakes that look like helping

These are the patterns that look like recovery from the inside but do nothing — or actively harm — from the customer's side. The internal scoreboard says "saved." The customer churns six weeks later anyway.

01 Recovery without authority.

The person making the call cannot resolve the underlying issue. They can listen, sympathise, escalate — but not fix. The customer feels heard, then refused. Worse than no call at all.

02 Money instead of acknowledgement.

Especially for relational cases. A €50 voucher offered to a customer who wanted to be recognised reads as a payoff. The next score is often lower than the original.

03 Closing the case before verifying.

Internal status moves to 'resolved' the moment the call ends. But the test is not 'we made the call', it is 'did the next score move?' Closing prematurely hides churn that is already happening.

04 Symptom recovery without cause fix.

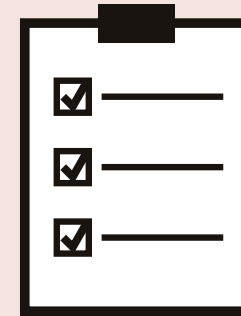
The individual customer is saved; the system that produced their complaint is untouched. The next hundred customers hit the same wall. Recovery without the outer loop is a treadmill.

05 Saving them, then surveying them again immediately.

Ending the recovery interaction with "please rate this experience" is tone-deaf. Give the relationship time to recover before asking for the next data point.

06 Treating high-value detractors as a special class.

It feels rational; it is operationally dangerous. Detractors in the long tail produce the public reviews and word-of-mouth. Tiering recovery by account size leaves the reputation flank exposed.



Chapter 8

Self-assessment

How well does your recovery programme actually work?

Twenty statements across the five recovery moves and the operating model behind them. Score one point for each statement you can honestly answer "true today" — not "aspirationally."

ACKNOWLEDGE

- Detractor scores trigger a named-human contact within 4 hours.
- First contact is by a human, not a templated email.
- The person making the call has the customer's full context.
- Frontline does not need management approval to make the call.

DIAGNOSE

- We classify every detractor against the four root causes.
- Diagnosis happens before any remedy is offered.
- We track which root cause produces the most detractors.
- We never apply the same remedy to all four causes.

REMEDY

- The person making the call has authority to deliver the remedy.
- Remedies are matched to root cause, not standardised across all.
- We document why this remedy was chosen, not just what was offered.
- Frontline can deviate from the standard remedy when it doesn't fit.

VERIFY

- Every recovered case is re-checked 6-12 weeks later.
- Recovery rate is tracked monthly and reported to the executive sponsor.
- Detractor-to-promoter conversion is the headline KPI.
- Cases that did not convert are reopened and re-diagnosed.

CLOSE THE OUTER LOOP

- Recurring detractor patterns trigger a structural process fix.
- Function owners — not CX — own the fix; CX owns verification.
- Saved detractors are explicitly told the underlying issue was fixed.
- We have a 'recovery-to-fix rate' metric and review it quarterly.

Interpreting your score

16-20 · Working recovery programme; focus on the outer loop and on recovery-to-fix rate. 10-15 · Activity exists, output doesn't; rebuild the playbook with authority and verification. Below 10 · Treat recovery as a programme, not a checkbox; start with the four root causes.

Closing thoughts

Saving customers is not luck. It is a disciplined practice — and the discipline is what separates programmes that consistently convert 35% of detractors into promoters from those that hover at 5%. Three principles distinguish the two.

Match the remedy to the root cause. The single biggest source of recovery failure is generic remedies. Diagnose first; remedy second.

Give the person on the call real authority. Recovery without authority is recovery theatre. The role making the call must be able to deliver the fix in the same conversation.

Close the outer loop, too. Saving one customer matters. Removing the cause that produced them matters more. A recovery programme without a structural-fix pipeline is a treadmill.

How InsightSofa can help.

InsightSofa is built for closed-loop recovery: detractor scores trigger named-owner routing inside the SLA, AI tagging classifies the four root causes automatically, and the recovery scorecard surfaces the five metrics from Chapter 6 on a single page. We have wired this into CRM and case-management systems across roughly forty client engagements — typical recovery rate after deployment moves from under 10% to above 35% within two quarters.

The fastest start is a 30-minute working session with our CX strategy team.

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All cases are composite, anonymised and re-stitched from real client engagements; no identifying details have been retained. Recovery rates cited are typical for InsightSofa deployments — your numbers will depend on your starting point.