

## Keep Those Complaints Coming

THEY'RE VALUABLE TO YOU—AND TO THE OFFENDING COMPANY

**M**ost of us hate complaints. We hate to get them, and we hate to give them, but on the other hand, I love to do both. I view complaints as a positive, not a negative.

When customers complain to a company about its products or services, they are giving that company an opportunity to improve. When you complain, you really are acting like a consultant to that particular company, letting it know where it has deficiencies. I complain all the time and, when someone complains to me, I thank them and do whatever is necessary to improve the product or service that was at the core of the problem.

I sometimes go as far as to recommend that companies encourage their employees to solicit complaints, to give customers the opportunity to tell them how they can improve. That might be something as simple as an employee saying to a customer, "Thank you for your business. Did you experience any problems as you were making your purchase?" Those statements do two things: They let customers know that you appreciate their business and that you are willing to accept—and act on—any complaints they might have.

Whether it's bad service or a faulty product, consumers have the right—and the responsibility—to complain. I offer up several suggestions on how to do so, whether you're an individual consumer or a company doing business with another company, and to have your problem resolved to your satisfaction.

**1. Arm Yourself.** Gather receipts, warranties, and anything else that documents your purchase and your problem. The more information you can provide the company, while registering your complaint, the greater the chance that the situation will be resolved to your satisfaction.

**2. Be Firm, But Courteous.** When you put people on the defensive by being angry and yelling, the chance of having your problem solved drops drastically. "Let me give you an example. When a friend discovered that her two \$50 vouchers for an airline had expired, she wrote to the airline. Her opening statement set the tone: 'I realize that this is my problem, not yours.' She went on to explain her situation and, within a matter of days, the airline sent her two new vouchers that were good for a year. By being polite and accepting responsibility for the situation, she was treated like a queen.

**3. Be Clear About What You Want.** Let's say that you purchased a new computer that isn't functioning properly. Instead of saying, "What are you going to do about this?", calmly state that you would like a refund or a replacement. When you bought that computer, you expected it to do everything the manufacturer and the retailer said it would do; when it didn't, you have a right to expect the company to make the situation right.

**4. Set a Reasonable Time Limit for Action.** Let's say that you had your carpets cleaned, but within two days stains started to reappear. Even if the carpet cleaning company says it will

clean them again, that's not good enough. Politely give them a time limit—10 working days is standard—to rectify the situation.

**5. Take It to the Top.** If your contacts with employees and managers do not result in a solution to your problem, contact the company's president. You can be sure that, when your complaint lands on the president's desk, he or she will hand it off to the appropriate person for resolution.

**6. Take It Over the Top.** If you have registered your complaint with a company's employees and its president and still have not had it resolved, that doesn't mean you're out of luck. You can contact a local consumer advocate organization, or the governmental agency that oversees the particular industry with which you are concerned. Most local TV stations and newspapers also have consumer reporters who address consumer complaints. The threat of bad publicity can be a great motivator for a company to resolve your problem.

The next time you have a complaint about a product or service, don't suffer in silence. Do yourself and the offending company a favor: complain. **RO**

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