

Cases of 'Customer Rage' Mount As Bad Service Prompts Venting

By JANE SPENCER

Have you ever sworn at a customer-service agent? If so, you're not alone.

A new report by the Virginia-based Customer Care Alliance found that 8% of frustrated consumers say they have cursed at a customer-service rep in the past year; and 28% said they have yelled or raised their voice. It is part of a growing trend dubbed "customer rage" by the study's authors.

The findings were part of a national telephone survey of 1,094 households that asked consumers about frustrations with products and services, such as cell-phones, credit cards and cars. Participants were asked how well the company handled their "most serious" complaint in the past year, and asked about factors like how many times they had to contact the company and how "satisfied" they were with the resolution.

The chief conclusion of the report: U.S. companies are driving their customers crazy.

Forty-five percent of households reported at least one "serious problem" in the past year with a product or service, and more than two-thirds of those customers had experienced "rage" over the way the incident was handled. Sixteen percent of respondents said they desired "revenge" on the company, and 3% took legal action.

The study also suggests that frustration is mounting. The authors compared the results of the 2003 study with a similar report on customer satisfaction conducted

by the U.S. government three decades ago. That report, released in 1976, before the rise of call centers and the multibillion-dollar customer-care-center industry, found that only 32% of respondents reported experiencing a serious problem in the past year.

A phenomenon called "ping-ponging" is partly to blame for the growing ranks of irate customers, according to the report's authors. In the 1970s, letter writing was the primary way customers resolved disputes. As a result, fewer people complained to the company when they had a problem. Now, a majority of customers try to resolve their problems over the phone—and they often wind up getting bounced between agents because the first-line contacts aren't empowered to resolve more serious complaints.

Customers reported making an average of 3.5 contacts in an attempt to resolve their most serious customer-service problem in the past year. The more times a customer contacted a company, the more likely they were to be unhappy with the final solution. For many customers, "satisfaction" with the resolution doesn't mean a free gift or extra perks: Plenty of customers report they just want a little attention when they are steamed.

Sixty-two percent of respondents said they wanted a chance to vent and tell their side of the story. Fifty-nine percent wanted an apology. Yet few respondents got what they sought. Only 1% felt they got the chance to vent, and just 5% reported receiving an apology. In the end, half of complainants reported that they

had received "nothing," and just 18% reported feeling completely satisfied.

Companies often miss out on an easy way to mollify consumers, according to the authors, by pushing customers to resolve their problems through automated systems and self-service technology such as a speech-recognition hotline or over e-mail. Even when their problem is solved, customers may still feel angry at the company. "You can't ventilate to a machine," says Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, a member of the consortium of customer-service firms that conducted the survey. "There are certain kinds of problems that are never going to be solved through technology."

Another explanation for rising complaint levels: Life has gotten more complicated as people deal with an ever-expanding number of services and companies. "People have more products," says Marc Grainer, founder of Customer Care Measurement, who was involved in both the previous government study and the 2003 update. "You don't have one phone, you have five. And products are more complicated."

The rising frustration levels may have a price for companies. The study confirmed the widespread belief that angry customers are "viral" and can damage a brand or company with bad word of mouth. Ninety percent of the angry customers reported they shared the story with friend.