

# **Seller Beware: Customers Are Mad as Hell**

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**Dianne Gagnon was furious. She bought a top-brand laptop computer in February, and the deal clincher**

was the offer of free additional hardware valued at \$298. But after 13 weeks, the hardware hadn't arrived and she was getting the runaround from the company.

"The items are out of stock," an indifferent customer rep told Gagnon when she called the toll-free customer-service number.

"When will you receive them?" Gagnon demanded.

"We don't know."

"Is there someone I can talk to who does know?"

"No . . ."

Gagnon went on the company's special rebate Web site and e-mailed customer service. "Tracy" e-mailed back, told her, "I can feel your pain," and gave her a toll-free help number -- the same one she had already phoned.

"I'm not a moron!" says Gagnon, a computer technician in Tyler, Tex.

Her temperature spiked again when she found the identical "out-of-stock" hardware available and for sale on the company's Web site. Bristling, she e-mailed the customer representative again, threatening to file a fraud complaint to the Federal Trade Commission and to tell the world her problem on online gripe forums.

"Apparently once a customer plunks down their hard-earned cash, we are considered the enemy and must be headed off at the pass!" protests Gagnon, who finally received her overdue hardware in July -- five frustrating months after the purchase. "It has become a nightmare for us consumers."

That recurring nightmare -- being embroiled in one absurd marketplace quandary after another -- is waking up heightened consumer rage, according to a consumer survey released last month.

In a random national sampling of Americans by Customer Care Measurement and Consulting, 45 percent reported a serious consumer problem or complaint in the past year, and 60 to 70 percent of that group said they experienced rage over how the company handled their problem.

"Consumers today are more angry and hostile than they ever have been," says Marc Grainer, chairman of CCMC, an Alexandria firm that has conducted polls on "the frequency with which people lose their cool" with customer care in automobile, telephone and consumer electronics and computer products and services.

Remember Howard Beale's impassioned rant in the 1976 movie "Network"? Where the flipped-out broadcaster urges Americans to "Get up. Go to your windows, open your windows, and stick your head out, and yell, 'I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!' "? That's the hair-pulling stage many consumers are now.

The CCMC survey found growing resentment about everything, from the technological hoops consumers must jump through to get to a "live" person to handle their problems to dismissive corporate responses that are too often unsatisfactory, ineffective or downright insulting. And that resentment is reflected in more consumers using profanity or seeking a measure of revenge.

**"One out of every four people calling a call center or visiting a store cursed!" says CCMC president Scott Broetzmann.**

**Jeff Maszel recently tasted the flip side. After he spent three hours unsuccessfully trying to negotiate the price of a new car at a local dealership, one of the employees there cursed at his wife -- repeatedly.**

**"Talk about rage!" barks Maszel, a Herndon management consultant, who was beside himself with anger. But what irked him most was that while apologetic, the dealership's management didn't seem to take the verbal assault seriously.**

**"They were more concerned about the sale than they were about what happened to the customer," he says.**

**Broetzmann says most of the time the raging consumer isn't the one who is out of line: "It's not because they are saying the company owes me their second-born or want unreasonable things. In most cases, they are looking to get the product or service fixed, and the next most likely thing they want is an apology and a chance to ventilate."**

**But some companies aren't even willing to acknowledge a problem exists, to apologize when at fault, or to take fair or common-sense actions to correct it, Grainer says. "It's not that consumers are dissatisfied with what was done so much as large percentages of them say nothing was done."**

**That's when revenge's ugly head pops up. Desire for revenge, from posting complaints online to picketing a store, straddles product lines: In auto-related disputes, it's 29 percent; in telephones, it's 22 percent; in computers, 20 percent.**

**The definition of revenge in the CCMC survey? "Make them pay for the hassle and inconvenience," Grainer explains. "The yelling and screaming, the keeping them on the phone, that's their way of exacting a pound of flesh."**

**Lisa Gunther got her revenge by writing a long letter to the company president, documenting every snide slight and misstep by one of his store managers in rectifying her problem.**

**"I felt angry, frustrated, taken advantage of," says Gunther, an Arlington resident who fought for months after the upscale furniture company where she bought a \$3,000 sofa wouldn't honor its warranty. Why not? The sofa was treated with fabric protectant the salesman persuaded her to buy with the purchase.**

**Gunther says the company stonewalled her, took weeks to return calls, and was condescending and snooty toward her. After months of aggravation, she got a full refund -- but only because she persisted. "I know they were just hoping I'd go away," she says.**

**Broetzmann and Grainer worked on a White House Office of Consumer Affairs national consumer survey in 1976 when companies spent little money on complaint handling and toll-free customer-rep numbers weren't available. Since then, corporations have pumped big bucks -- \$15 billion to \$19 billion this year, according to Jupiter Research, which tracks corporate trends -- into taking care of unhappy customers.**

**"We would've thought after all these years there would be fewer problems and customers would be more satisfied when they complained," Broetzmann says. "We found out it's just the opposite."**

Not everyone concurs. The American Customer Satisfaction Index, an economic indicator that measures consumers' attitudes, reported last month that customer satisfaction has climbed 1.2 percent this year, reaching 73.8 on a 100-point scale. Broetzmann says the ACSI measures satisfaction with the quality of products and services rather than measuring dissatisfaction after problems arise. "Our study gets underneath that surface," he says.

Cherie Keen, director of research at SOCAP International (Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals) in Alexandria, acknowledges that some companies are good at customer care and others aren't. "It's all in how they handle it. But for the most part, people are really paying attention to consumers now and that's a movement over the last couple of years," Keen says. "Our research shows that only between 30 and 35 percent of calls into companies are complaints."

But those numbers don't tell the whole story, Broetzmann says, adding that the reaction his firm's survey got from some corporations was more telling: "They said, 'Quite frankly, the people who are customer-raging, we probably don't want as customers anyway.' "

Dennis Baird of Marietta, Ga., was more than ready never to fly AirTran again after taking a morning flight from Atlanta to Newport News, Va., in March. The flight was diverted to Baltimore because of fog, and after several hours returned to Atlanta. Promised seats on a 5:40 p.m. connecting flight were filled. Baird ended up on a 10:30 p.m. flight, arriving in Newport News after 1 a.m.

The AirTran customer service manager in Atlanta insisted the airline wasn't responsible for weather-related problems, reminded passengers it was a "discount airline," and offered them \$7 for the missed lunch.

"We were amazed and angry," says Baird, a logistics coordinator, who sent repeated e-mail complaints to AirTran and posted his gripe online. Eventually, he got an apology and a \$50 credit. "Had they apologized in the first place and offered compensation, or a seat on another airline," he says, "the situation would have been quickly defused."

Fred Cannon, director of customer relations at AirTran, says the company's policy for handling flight interruptions doesn't always suit every passenger. "Things do go wrong but you have to try to recover," Cannon says. "You have to listen and try to find out what the customer needs."

Spreading word-of-mouth woes via online forums as Baird did is something ticked-off consumers are doing more often. The CCMC survey found that 11 percent of consumers with computer problems had used chat rooms or online bulletin boards to share bad experiences. Matthew Smith, founder of Complaints.com, which has posted 20,000 complaints since its launch three years ago, says all enraged consumers are looking for is "a little love."

"They're looking to be valued as a consumer and as a person," he says. "And that's where customer service is completely lacking -- just simply expressing appreciation, even if you don't have the answer. If you say it in human terms, nine times out of 10 it'll be okay."

Grainer says the CCMC survey found just that. "Just by letting people ventilate or by giving them an apology, by doing just those two things, which cost nothing, you can increase brand loyalty," he says. "Companies are spending billions of dollars on fancy technology and forgetting that the simple things go a lot farther."

**Dianne Gagnon has a piece of advice for corporate America. "Listen to what the customer is saying, rather than assume the customer is out to cheat them. Hire competent employees, commit to truth in advertising, never pass the buck."**

**And if companies don't heed that advice? "We have better places to spend our money," says Gagnon, adding that she's now fighting with her laptop manufacturer over a keyboard problem. "Would I ever buy anything from them again? Not a chance!"**

*Got questions? A consumer complaint? E-mail details to [oldenburgd@washpost.com](mailto:oldenburgd@washpost.com) or write Don Oldenburg, The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071.*

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