



Five Trusty Tips to Score Better Customer Service

by Michael Estrin

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Few Consumers Get Good Customer Service

Good customer service isn't an oxymoron, but it can be incredibly difficult to find.

A study completed in September by the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University in Tempe and others underscores the problem. Researchers found that incidents of customer complaints rose 13% from 1976 to 2011. Surprisingly, only 21% of customer complaints were resolved to the customer's satisfaction. Just as aggravating, the typical consumer complaint averaged 4.4 calls before conclusion, an effect that researchers describe as "ping-ponging."

"Most companies have adopted many of the correct complaint-handling policies but have failed in the execution," says Scott Broetzmann, CEO of Alexandria, Va.-based Customer Care Measurement and Consulting. "Ninety percent of those complaining in the latest survey say they just wanted to be treated with dignity, but only 40% felt they got that."

While businesses can do a better job of handling customer complaints, there are things consumers can do to better navigate the complex and often stressful process.

Making the First Call

While it's tempting to gear up for a fight when calling, the best advice is to be friendly, according to Richard Shapiro, founder of The Center For Client Retention, a Berkeley Heights, N.J., firm.

"It's best to try to personalize the call and build a relationship with the representative before stating your issue," Shapiro says.

Shapiro recommends introducing yourself and addressing the operator by his name.

But it's just as important to be firm, says Minneapolis-based customer service consultant John Tschohl, author of "Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service."

"Be very specific with what you want," Tschohl says. "Say things like 'I want to cancel the order' or 'I want my money back.'"

It's also a good idea to take notes. Tschohl says that customers should write down who they spoke with, when the conversation took place and what was said.

But if the customer service representative doesn't seem to understand the problem, it's best to hang up and try again, says Craig Handley, CEO of Listen Up Espanol, a Spanish-language call center in Portland, Maine.

Speak to a Supervisor

If a representative can't remedy the issue, you'll likely need to escalate the complaint by taking it to a supervisor. But how you ask for the supervisor can make all the difference, says Joseph Michelli, who has written several books on customer service, including "The Starbucks Experience."

After years of working with call center staffs, Michelli says, "It's often most helpful to position an escalation referral in an empowering way." Most reps really do want to help but may lack the authority. Michelli says acknowledge that your request falls outside of what the rep can do and then ask politely to speak with a person who can "explore additional solutions."

While most customer service reps will gladly refer you to a supervisor, sometimes that request can turn the call negative. If that happens, Handley says the customer should take control by confirming the rep's identity "either by using their name or their employee number." If the call continues its negative course, Handley says it's better to hang up and ask the next rep to refer you to a supervisor. At that point, you can summarize your underlying issue and the negative customer service you received.

Take it to the Top

Whether they end well or not, most consumer complaints begin and end with the customer service department. But if you're not satisfied, there is still one more company resource to try.

"Most companies have a group of executive office representatives to respond to unresolved requests that have escalated," Shapiro says. "If the customer is not satisfied after speaking to a supervisor, he could look up the telephone number for the corporate headquarters, then call the switchboard and ask to speak to (someone in the) office of the president."

Whether that tactic works often depends on the company. And if you go that route, you'll most likely have to write a letter or email, Tschohl says. If you choose to write to the company president, he offers the following advice: "The effective complaint letter is short, starts off emphasizing your satisfaction with the company until now, describes why you're dissatisfied and finally ends with stating specifically what you want."

Take Advantage of Social Media

You've probably heard stories about influential bloggers bringing big companies to their knees by posting customer service horror stories. But you don't need a big social media footprint to get good customer service that way. You just need to understand your target.

If you're using social media to resolve a service breakdown, it is worth identifying how the company structures its social media responses, Michelli says. And, while nearly all big companies have a social media presence, not all of them are set up to provide outreach.

For those who choose to circumvent traditional customer service, it's important to target the comment at the company. If you're using Facebook, experts say you should post on the company's Facebook page, not yours. And if you're using Twitter for your complaint, you'll want to direct it toward a verified account.

It's also important to consider your security.

"Don't attempt to publicly resolve an account-specific problem where sharing of your personal information may be necessary," says Jeremy Sokolic, senior vice president of marketing at LivePerson, a New York company that makes software for customer engagement. Instead, Sokolic advises that after making contact through social media, customers take the conversation offline or into a secure setting.

Remember Social Media Etiquette

If you choose to go the social media route, it's important to consider your tone, says Erik Deckers, co-owner of Professional Blog Service, a blogging and social media agency in Indianapolis.

Deckers says he often uses social media to resolve his personal customer service complaints and finds it quite effective. But he advises consumers in the same boat to be polite when voicing the initial complaint and to say "thank you" publicly to the company and the rep when the issue is resolved.

It's also good to remember that at least some parts of a Twitter or Facebook conversation will be public. So Deckers says you really don't want to be abusive or mean, and he adds, "I don't want my name linked to being a jerk."

And while it's tempting to vocalize your complaint publicly, it can be just as effective to direct the message to the company, says Roni Weiss, founder of RW Social, a social media agency in New York. The less-public route can sometimes be more effective because the conversation starts on a positive note.

Scott Broetzmann

President & CEO

Customer Care Measurement & Consulting



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