

YOUR MONEY-Complaining the right way

By Mitch Lipka

Tue Jul 10, 2012

(Reuters) - It isn't enough to be right to get what you want in the world of customer relations. If you have been wronged in some way - whether you bought a television that does not work, or had a negative hotel experience or noticed an error on a credit card bill - you have to complain effectively in order to get a resolution.

"In any kind of complaint experience, you're pedaling uphill," said Scott Broetzmann, president and CEO of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting LLC in Alexandria, Virginia. "In many cases, the deck is stacked against you in terms of getting your complaint heard."

His company, which works to help companies improve their customer relations, has been part of an ongoing university study about consumers' relationship with companies. From years of analysis and observation, Broetzmann said there are ways of complaining that will give you the best shot possible to break through corporate inertia and others that will virtually ensure failure. The study found nearly half of those who complain felt they received nothing for the effort.

PICK UP THE PHONE

Most consumers who contact companies do so by phone, by a margin of 69 percent compared with only 9 percent who use the Internet, according to the study by the W. P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University.

With a big company, it is likely that the first call will be fielded by someone whose job is to sort through complaints. "That person has talked to between 80 and 250 people like you that day," said Broetzmann. You need to keep that in mind, because these are not people likely to be very receptive to a rant or a long-winded set-up and commentary.

"Practice self-control and civility if you expect to get what you want," he said. Aggressive behavior is likely to fail. "You have to be very intentional. You have to choose correctly how you're going to behave, because they've heard it all before."

The first responders are not likely to have any authority to compensate you or offer much of anything. So the best bet is to establish exactly what you are taking issue with and what you want in return - whether it is money back or an apology. Your goal when dealing with the first round of customer service, if they do not (or more likely, cannot) offer what you are seeking is to get your case escalated to a supervisor who does have the authority, Broetzmann said.

NETWORK ONLINE

While telephone complaining is the best route to reaching a real person and obtaining a sense of where your complaint is going, there are situations where writing a letter or using a social network like Twitter or Facebook can serve you well. Take filmmaker Kevin Smith's notorious 2010 dispute with Southwest Airlines Co. Smith tweeted complaints about being kicked off a flight, and then the airline tweeted apologies.

One of the most extreme examples of the respect some companies show for social networking came last year when public relations and social media executive Peter Shankman jokingly tweeted to Morton's Steakhouse, "Hey @Mortons - can you meet me at Newark Airport with a porterhouse when I land in 2 hours?" He was greeted by a server in a tuxedo with a porterhouse dinner wrapped up to-go.

While the extraordinary result in that case was an outlier, consumers routinely use social networking to air a complaint and mainly do so to vent, the Arizona State study found. There are, however, some companies that have established a pattern of quickly responding to consumer complaints lodged on social networks - including Southwest Airlines, Starbucks Corp and Comcast Corp. Some companies realize that responding to complaints or requests in such a public forum, where the result can be shared, can be an image-booster.

Broetzmann believes it is important to research thoroughly a company's track record for handling social media complaints and to use only that medium (if you want to receive some sort of compensation), or your attempt to gain satisfaction will remain floating in the ether.

There are also advocates on the Web who can help. The U.S. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau recently launched a public database of complaints about financial products, including credit cards and student loans, and collected more than 45,000 entries over a period of a just a few months. The agency takes those entries and follows up on them, intervening where they can to help consumers do things like recover mortgage overpayments, reverse errant credit card charges and correct a computer error that mistakenly assessed costly fees.

WRITE A LETTER

The old-fashioned complaint letter still has its fans. And when providing documentation is important or you are dealing with a high-dollar item, that can still be the best way to go, Broetzmann said.

Etiquette expert Sandra Lamb, author of "How to Write It," offers these tips:

- Collect all pertinent information and arrange it in logical and chronological order.
- Keep all original documents and make copies to send with your letter.
- Write in a timely manner.
- Address a real person, preferably someone with authority.
- Open the letter with a positive statement, if possible, about your dealings with the company or the product.
- State the problem succinctly.
- Make a request for what you want to resolve the problem.
- Include your contact information and when you plan to follow-up on your request.

Kaneshia Baynard, 40, follows similar guidelines when she complains. The Colorado-based life coach said it is important to keep the letter civil and avoid any content that is not directly to the point. "I have received written responses, calls, and gift cards as the businesses' way to apologize."

One business owner said that the civil approach works when he receives a complaint. "It's always best to begin with a kind word and courtesy," said Jeff Kear, owner of the software company Planning Pod.

Receiving documentation, when appropriate, is helpful, he said, as is follow-up (within a week). "Even the best companies get backlogged or lose track of a request every once in a while. So if you feel like you're not being heard, follow up on your request and ask when you can expect to get a reply."

Those who fail to receive a satisfactory resolution can still turn, when appropriate, to federal agencies, state and local consumer offices, an attorney general's office or the Better Business Bureau.

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