

Customers' complaints need strategy

 By [Aki Kalliatakis](#)

24 May 2012

Customers have the power to change service levels, performance and product, yet still they feel they are often mistreated. Successful complaining however needs to be focused in order to achieve lasting results.

No matter what they buy, customers have more choices and, in a world of information transparency, do not fall for opaque and untrue promises made by businesses. Many businesses have lagged behind in understanding the frustration that customers feel when they don't get what they want. All the "tricks" that were effective in the past have been exposed to a cynical public and they are more willing to share this as vociferously as possible.

Larger circle

A decade ago, an unhappy customer would tell on average around 8 to 10 others; today, that number has increased to somewhere between 30 and 35 other people. Why has this changed so dramatically?

Firstly, the subjects of customer value and customer experiences are more popular than ever before as "nouveau poor" consumers struggle to make ends meet, thus making people more willing to talk about their purchases. People becoming more aware of their rights, such as the Consumer Protection Act have exacerbated this.

Secondly, most consumers have more access to the mass media than ever before: just about every radio station, TV channel, magazine and newspaper has some form of "consumer column" where people can voice their frustrations. Literally millions of listeners, viewers and readers.

However, the third reason for the dramatic increase is that the internet has opened up many possibilities to discuss good or bad experiences with millions of other consumers. These include Twitter, Facebook, the blogosphere and YouTube for spreading the word to one's connections and millions of others.

Websites offering a say

One classic example is called "United Breaks Guitars", where a band wrote a song about a bad experience on United Airlines in the US. The video went viral, tens of thousands of people vowed never to fly with United again and the share price has never recovered.

There are also websites that are specifically dedicated to customer experiences. In South Africa, we have [hellopeter.com](#), [NeverFlySAA.com](#), [Hellkom.com](#) and many others. Globally, there are websites where customers can share travel

experiences (TripAdvisor), evaluate their teachers and professors (RateMyTeachers.com), review books, movies and music (amazon.com and others), and even share experiences of lawyers (SolicitorsFromHell.co.uk).

Adding to company's woes

There are a few main problems for companies when their customers complain to others, but do not tell them (about 4% of unhappy customers actually tell someone in the business that has the power to take action). When customers tell their stories, other customers tend to add more credibility to their comments since they do not trust what companies tell them - even though the complaint may be groundless.

Therefore, even though complaints are often exaggerated, companies are already on the back foot. It is often impossible to talk to the unhappy customer because it is impossible to identify them. Then the company has to spend more on advertising, promotions, sales commissions and public relations activities to try to regain its reputation.

However, it is not only what customers say that can cause problems, it is also what they do. Unhappy customers whose complaint is not dealt with properly will probably never return, resulting in the loss of lifetime value. In addition, in order to get revenge they actively sabotage the business by mistreating staff, damaging property, returning goods or demanding compensation, threatening to sue, not paying their accounts on time and more.

Good ways to complain

So what can you do when you are unhappy with a business that you deal with? Is there a "good" way to complain?

1. Know your rights: The Consumer Protection Act has been very clear about the rights of consumers, and some of the highlights include
 - The right to free and unlimited access to products and services and to fair value, high quality and safety in those purchased.
 - The right to choose whatever businesses you want to deal with. For example, banks often demand that you deal with their lawyers and insurance companies when they lend you money. They can no longer do so.
 - The right to fair prices, especially when there is differential pricing for different customers; this also includes rights to information, including prices, in plain and understandable language. If two prices are displayed for the same item, you can demand the lower of the two.
 - The right to fair and responsible marketing, especially practices that can be considered misleading, unethical or immoral, such as the use of fear and threats. These rights also extend to reward programmes, coupons, and catalogue purchases where you didn't have the opportunity to inspect goods.
 - The right to stop all direct marketing to yourself any time.
 - The right to cancel fixed-term agreements, (such as cellphone contracts,) without penalties at the end of the term.
 - The right to demand pre-authorisation from you for repairs and maintenance that may surprise you later.
 - The right to cancel direct marketing agreements that you signed - usually within five days.
 - The right to return goods and seek redress when they don't match your expectations.
 - The right to keep and not pay for unsolicited goods or services.
 - The right to sales records of all your purchases, and to fair, justifiable and reasonable terms and conditions.
2. Know the facts: As always, prevention is better than cure, and you need to do your homework before embarking on impulse purchases that you may regret. However, knowing the facts also means that before you complain, you need to get all of your information together, including paperwork, so that your complaint is justified.

It's always a good idea to have evidence of the date and time of your purchase, the person that you dealt with, copies of receipts and contracts like warranties, letters and emails that may have been sent, photographs of defective goods or videos of deficient service, names of witnesses (if any), and any other evidence that will help you to make your

case.

3. Complain when you are calm, (if possible): This is not always possible or easy, and anger can give you the energy you need to defend your rights. However, you need to understand that anger begets defensive and angry behaviour in response, and you are better off having a calm discussion before you start losing it. Avoid threats and personal attacks on the person dealing with your complaint. Remember: Resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick.
4. You probably need to state and clarify three things, in writing if necessary:
 - That you don't want to spend time and energy fighting and, in fact want to give the company a chance to resolve your problem.
 - Exactly what it is that you are unhappy with. Be specific and avoid terms like, "This ice-cream tastes rubbish".
 - At the end of your complaint, ask specifically what they will do to deal with everything, and in particular, set a reasonable deadline for resolution
5. What if it is not resolved after your initial action?

First, escalate it to the most senior person in the company. If that does not work, and you are still unhappy, contact the industry ombudsman if one exists. If that does not help, contact the Office of Consumer Protection on 0861 843 384, or in Pretoria on +27 (0) 394 1436 / 1558 /1076. (Alternatively, send an email to contactus@thedti.gov.za). If you still do not get action, then use the other options mentioned in this article, including legal action.

ABOUT AKI KALLIATAKIS

Aki Kalliatakis is the Managing Partner of The Leadership LaunchPad, a business focused on customer loyalty and radical marketing. Contact him on +27 (0)83 379 3466, +27 (0)11 640-3958 or customer@lcon.co.za. Follow [@akikalliatakis](#) on Twitter.

- Airline PR disasters and the lessons you can learn - 3 May 2017
- Where is customer management going in 2017? - 14 Dec 2016
- 'Yule' struggle without solid Christmas sales - 25 Nov 2016
- When rules *must* be broken - 6 Sep 2016
- Big sponsors make it hard to swallow - 17 Aug 2016

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>