



Satisfaction Please! (Part 1)

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Introduction:

Accidents, mistakes, poor communication, and, at times, seller dishonesty cause problems for consumers in the marketplace. What do you do when you are dissatisfied with a good or service? Some people grumble to themselves or friends. Others take action.

Consumers take action because they want a problem fixed. A complaint to a business gives the company the opportunity to correct a problem and it gives you a chance to feel better about your purchase.

When you tell a business that something is wrong, you are also, in effect, telling it how to improve. Companies spend millions of dollars in market research to find out what consumers think about their products or services. With a complaint, you are volunteering this information for free!

In some situations, you have an obligation to complain. A complaint about a safety hazard can prevent others from being physically harmed. Reporting unethical business practices may help other consumers from being scammed.

Answer the following online activity questions after you have had a class discussion about the topics of customer satisfaction and service.



1. What steps, if any, did the buyers take to address their dissatisfaction?



Task:

In this lesson you will learn the basic steps in the complaint process and how to write a complaint letter.

Process:

The Gentle Art of Complaining

Step 1: Contact the Seller

Most reputable businesses are willing to make exchanges and refunds on merchandise if a consumer has kept the receipt and the return of a purchase is in a timely fashion—typically 30 days.

The best place to start when resolving a consumer problem is with the seller. If your complaint is about merchandise you bought close to where you live, a personal visit may be the quickest way to handle it. With a reputable business, a receipt and the item you purchased is all you will need to get your problem resolved. Other problems - such as a service problem with a bank account or insurance - may be more easily solved with a telephone call.

Explain your problem to a salesperson or customer service representative. If this person can't resolve your problem, ask to speak to a manager. It's natural to feel angry or frustrated with some consumer problems, but stay calm. Verbally attacking rarely gets you off on the right foot. Ask for a resolution you think is fair. People are usually more willing to give you what you want when you are reasonable.

Write down the name of the person who took your complaint, the date, and what is said. A phone number for follow-up may also be helpful. You may need to talk to that person again or refer to the conversation in later steps in the complaint process.

Step 2: Go Higher Up

If a manager can't help, this is probably the time to go higher up—to a national headquarters for a seller or to the manufacturer of the product. Many companies have a special customer relations or consumer affairs department for solving consumer problems. You may be able to find a toll-free number or address for this office on the product label or other papers included with your purchase. If this is not the case:

* The Federal Citizen Information Center (FCIS) maintains an online directory of several hundred corporations at <http://www.consumeraction.gov/corpormain.shtml>. A separate listing of auto manufacturers is maintained at <http://www.consumeraction.gov/carman.shtml>.

* Try doing a Web search for a company Web site. Look for a "Contact Us" link that provides phone numbers and addresses.

* Dial the directory of toll-free numbers at 1-800-555-1212 to find out if the company has a toll-free number listed.

* Ask your local librarian to help you. Most public libraries have reference books with contact information for corporations.

As you do your search, keep in mind the name of the manufacturer or parent company is often different from the brand name. The Thomas Register of American Manufacturers—a book available at many libraries—lists the manufacturers of thousands of products.

Step 3: Seek Outside Help

If you still aren't satisfied after talking to everyone in a company who can help, it is time to seek help from an outside organization. You might contact a local consumer group or a government agency responsible for consumer protection. A number of these organizations are discussed in Parts 2 and 3.

How to Write a Wrong

In some situations, you might want to write a letter instead of making a visit or telephone call. Letters leave you with a written record of what has happened. If need be, they can be used as evidence in court.

This is the kind of information to include in your letter:

1. The date and location of your purchase.
2. A description of what you purchased. Include the model number, serial number, color, size, and so on.
3. The product's price and your method of payment, such as credit card, check,



or cash. Include the check number or account number when appropriate.

4. A specific explanation of what is wrong.
5. Names of those to whom you have already complained, if anyone. Tell what they have or have not done to remedy the situation.
6. How you want your problem resolved. Do you want a repair, replacement or your money back?
7. Your name, address and a phone number where you can be contacted.
8. Copies of sales receipts, warranties and other documents regarding your problem. Keep the originals.

Your communication should be brief, clear and honest. Your request should be fair to both you and the seller. Don't be sarcastic or threatening—the person reading your letter probably was not responsible for your problem, but he or she may be very helpful in resolving it.

View a sample complaint letter at http://www.consumeraction.gov/caw_problems_sample_complaint.shtml.

Conclusion:

What kind of consumer are you? One who grumbles when you have a consumer problem or one who takes action? While a complaint requires some time and effort, you give a seller the opportunity to fix a problem if you do take the trouble to complain. You have a second chance to feel good about the seller and what you purchased. If your problem involves a safety hazard or fraud, you have a responsibility to file a complaint so others will not be harmed.

The first step in filing a complaint should always be returning to the seller. Whether you do this in person, by telephone or via a letter, you are more likely to get what you are asking for if you:

- * can provide information to support your claim,
- * use a calm, non-threatening approach, and
- * ask for a solution that is fair to you and to the seller.

Assessment Activity:

Write an effective complaint letter concerning a consumer problem you or someone you know has experienced.

- * If you need an address for a company, use the resources in Step 2: Going Higher Up.
- * Be sure to include all elements of a letter that are appropriate as listed earlier in this lesson.
- * The sample complaint letter at http://www.consumeraction.gov/caw_problems_sample_complaint.shtml will also help you prepare your communication.

Ask your teacher whether you should use word processing software or the LETTER GENERATOR found at http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/letter_generator/ (Select the “Business Letter” option after entering your name).

When you are finished, use the list below to check your letter.

Extension Activity:

1. Working in teams of three, role-play a situation in which a complaint is taken to a salesperson and then a manager. Write a paragraph or two telling how you felt about the experience.
2. Businesses also like to know when you like a good or service. Write a letter giving a business positive feedback. You might recognize a salesperson who was especially helpful during your shopping experience or note how pleased you are with a company's product.

Satisfaction Please! Checklist



As a consumer, you have the right to expect satisfaction when you make a purchase. If there is a problem, a letter is one tool you can use to make things right. An advantage of a complaint letter over a visit or telephone call is that you have a written record of what went wrong and what you would like to have happen next.

When writing a complaint letter, you will want to do the following:

- Include the date and location of your purchase.
- Describe what you purchased. Include the model number, serial number, color, size, and so on.
- Note the product's price and your method of payment, such as credit card, check, or cash. Include a check number or account number when appropriate.
- Give a specific explanation of what is wrong.
- Name those to whom you have already complained, if anyone. Tell what they have or have not done to remedy the situation.
- Tell how you want your problem resolved. Do you want the product repaired or replaced or do you want your money back. Be reasonable.
- Include your name, address and a phone number where you can be contacted.
- Enclose copies of sales receipts, warranties and other documents regarding your problem. Keep the originals.
- Be brief and to the point.
- Don't be sarcastic or threatening.

