

# Customers' Anger Grows Over Poor Service

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Businesses increasingly spend money to improve their customer service.

Unfortunately the results of a Customer Care Alliance survey "Customer Complaint Handling - The Multibillion Dollar Sinkhole" show the money has been poorly spent and that if anything, customers are becoming increasingly angry and downright hostile about poor customer service.

The study, which was based on a national telephone survey of 1,094 households, asked customers for the most serious problems they'd experienced in the past year. Forty-five percent of respondents reported problems with products or services. Frighteningly, 68 percent of the respondents experienced rage in connection with their most serious problem. Seems like everyone has a short fuse these days, and it's not just out on the highway or up in an airplane cabin. Customers wanted their problems resolved, wanted to be paid for their trouble and 16 percent of those respondents wanted revenge. They wanted the companies to pay for any hassle or inconvenience they experienced.

Problem areas: Poorly executing customer service guidelines does more to anger customers than offering no customer service.

Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement and Consulting and a founding member of the Customer Care Alliance, said people get angry quickly and are easily frustrated when problems are not resolved easily.

"We live in an environment that relies on instant gratification," he said. "There are a number of factors why customers are so unhappy. Some of it is frustration with technology because they can't talk to a human being in many cases."

Many customers are frustrated by having to navigate complex telephone or Web page complaint systems. "If someone has a serious question, that doesn't lend itself to pushing 14 buttons on a phone or clicking on a (frequently asked questions link). Technology that is wrongly deployed is one key explanation for a lot of the rage we see," he said.

Businesses also have set themselves up to be criticized. They set unrealistic expectations and customers are then disappointed and angered.

"We've trained customers to react in certain ways. Too many businesses use customer satisfaction as a marketing campaign. You can't go a day without seeing a couple of ads where someone claims to be the best in customer satisfaction," Broetzmann said. "Customers are led down this primrose path to believe everybody is really good. Anything, then, that is less than a great experience cuts against the grain of logic."

Customers who complain usually have legitimate complaints, Broetzmann said. Most simply want their problem fixed and want to receive an

apology and have a chance to vent. "Most customers ask for little and get very little in return," he said.

The need for revenge: Broetzmann said most customers feel a need to exact revenge when they feel a need for equity. He cited an example when he had trouble getting a complaint resolved because the company had changed owners and it was difficult to pin down who was responsible for fixing his problem.

"I spent six or seven hours getting this resolved. That first hour I was pretty reasonable, but by the time I got to the sixth hour, I knew I was going to get my revenge by asking for more or escalating the complaint up to make sure I was heard by people higher up in the consumer-affairs food chain," he said. "They offered a \$20 credit on my first bill. That's not going to cut it. They've got to offer something better than that."

Previous research showed that dissatisfied consumers told twice as many friends and colleagues about their negative experience as satisfied customers told about their positive treatment. The 2003 study suggests that the ratio of negative to positive word of mouth must be revised to 3.4 to 1.

And complaining customers have more and more avenues to vent their anger.

Earlier this year a Marshalltown couple complained about "Snobby Service from Des Moines Chrysler" in a posting on The SqueakyWheel.com. The car dealership filed a lawsuit saying the posting was intended to create "public hatred, contempt or ridicule." The dealership asked for an unspecified amount of money and wanted the comment removed from the Web site.

The car dealership later dropped its lawsuit, but that came after more than 58,000 people saw the complaint and a second customer created a complaint page.

What can businesses do? Broetzmann suggests businesses take a look at how they deploy their technology. They need to make sure it's easy to navigate. It doesn't make sense for a business to try to save money by not hiring people to staff customer service centers if in the end they just make customers angry and lose their business.

He also recommends businesses train their front line agents so they learn the magic words to defuse anger and let customers walk away with some degree of satisfaction. And he suggests businesses change how they measure whether they are providing good service.

"Many call centers judge it based on the average handle time - how much time they spend on each call," he said.

A rushed call will never work to make customers happy. Businesses would be better off totaling how many of those calls ended with happy customers who in turn will likely be repeat customers.

Some examples of problem areas:

INEFFECTIVE RESPONSE GUIDELINES: Inability to say no quickly when appropriate, setting unrealistic objectives such as 100 percent satisfaction, remedies that do not correlate with increased complainant satisfaction, limited front line empowerment and limited use of apology/opportunity for complainant to vent.

POORLY EXECUTED CALL CENTER POLICIES: Inappropriate application of self-service technologies, long waits to reach agents, agent call quotas that are too high and inhibit performance, and case tracking software that creates a barrier to problem solving.

OTHER ISSUES: Limited training of front line personnel who handle complaints; poorly executed use of e-mail or Web page.

Source: Customer Care Alliance