

The fine art of complaining: Kvetching can be very effective, if you do it right

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For those of you who believe there's nothing worse than a chocolate chip cookie with no chocolate chips, a dryer that doesn't work or a sales clerk who says, "I don't know, I just work here," B.L. Ochman is a saviour.

No gripe is too big or too small for Ochman, who ran a successful business for 14 years complaining on behalf of people who didn't have the guts or the patience for it.

The New York-based Internet marketing expert started Rent-a-Kvetch (kvetch being the Yiddish word for a complainer) as a hobby in 1981 and continued it until 1995. She had clients across Canada, the U.S., England and Australia.

"I liked helping people. I would do the research, find out who to complain to, write letters and resolve the problem about 90 per cent of the time," says Ochman. "I got people new fridges, washers and dryers, even an automobile at one time."

It all started decades ago when Ochman, a journalism major in university, was studying for exams with a group of friends.

They opened a box of Tootsie Roll lollipops they had bought for a study break and found every single one of them was missing the Tootsie Roll in the centre.

Since she was the writer in the group, her friends decided she should be the one to send a letter of complaint.

When a huge package of free lollipops arrived at her doorstep -- this time with the appropriate centres -- a light went on in her head.

"Complaining can be very effective, if you do it right," says Ochman, who is writing a how-to manual on the subject, due to be published next year.

And it's a win-win situation for the company you're complaining to. "An unhappy customer gives the company an opportunity to fix the problem -- it serves as an early warning system," she says.

"Companies who think they can continue to ignore complaints are just operating on borrowed time, because eventually, customers will take their business elsewhere."

Still, people like Ochman, who stand up for what they want, are somewhat of an anomaly, says Doug Olsen, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Alberta.

That's because many of us just don't know how to ask for what we want. Some of us may have complained before but got turned off by the limp, "Thanks for your feedback," or "I understand why you're upset" lines and subsequent lack of resolution.

Others get discouraged by not knowing which 1-800 number to call, or who they can talk to who can actually do something about the problem.

"Only a small minority of people complain, but a large number of people will personally boycott stores because of poor service," says Olsen.

"We as Canadians don't like to make waves. We're nice and polite, while other cultures may be quicker to point out problems.

"But when companies don't get complaints, they're missing out on hearing from the people who are unhappy. A happy person might tell three or four other people about it, but an upset individual will tell 10 others. Word of mouth is a powerful influence."

A study released in January by the Verde Group, a Canadian firm that measures the cost of customer dissatisfaction, shows that more than half of Canadians will not even walk into a store if they've heard something bad about it from family or friends.

Considering close to 40 per cent of Canadians have experienced problems when shopping for items that cost less than \$200, that's a lot of lost retail earnings.

But there is good news for organizations: They can retain the vast majority of customers if they handle their complaints properly. Olsen and his wife are among them.

One night his wife opened a package of cream cheese for dinner, only to find it was green.

After she called Safeway to complain about it, the store's manager was standing on her doorstep 10 minutes later, bearing fervent apologies and two new packages of cream cheese.

"He could have blamed it on her instead, said she must not have refrigerated it properly," says Olsen. "But he didn't. Because of that, even though we could have shopped at the competing grocer across the street, we chose to shop at that Safeway instead."

A markedly different experience occurred at another grocery retailer, when Olsen was about to buy \$400 worth of food and had a coupon for a free box of chicken burgers as an incentive for spending that amount.

The store was out of the chicken variety, so he took a box of turkey burgers off the shelf made by the same company and cost the same amount.

The clerk looked at the coupon and said, "Sorry, sir. Read the coupon. It says no substitutions."

Olsen asked to speak to a manager, who gave him the same response. So he turned around and left the \$400 cart of unpurchased groceries at the till, and never shopped there again.

That happened 12 years ago. Since then, Olsen has repeated the story, with the name of the grocer, to students in each of the classes he has taught.

"Probably about 3,000 people have heard the chicken burger story by now," he says -- an awful lot of negative advertising that could have been avoided.

Organizations are quick to train staff on product knowledge, but not on how to deal with

people, he says.

That's why it's important to be specific about what you're looking for -- don't expect them to read your mind.

"Next time your baggage is lost, don't just say, 'I'm not happy,'" says Olsen. "Say, 'I need money to pay for clothing and sundry items and I expect you to pay for it.'

"When you ask specifically for these items, you'll discover they have policies put in place to deal with these matters."

One of the things people complain about the most is rudeness from staff, says Carolyn Guichon, marketing instructor at the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary.

A recent research study Guichon read on avoiding medical malpractice suits, concluded the majority of them could have been avoided if only the doctors had been polite.

"It was a case of, 'I didn't really want to sue him, but he was just so rude,'" says Guichon. "People get mad when they feel devalued. You need to shake hands with them, talk to them and make them feel like they're there."

Canadian culture contributes to this lack of emphasis on good manners, she says.

"We want to educate our children so they're doctors or lawyers, not customer service professionals. But even in these professions, customer service is everything," says Guichon.

The places you're least likely to get good customer service? According to the Verde Group study, you'll find the most problems in Ontario, British Columbia and right here in Alberta.

When the economy is soaring and job turnover is high, as it is right now, customer service tends to plummet.

"It's because people don't feel like their careers and their jobs are at stake. They think, 'How much will I go out of my way for something I don't really care about?,'" says Guichon. "Either the company makes you care or the economy does."

One of the worst instances of customer service Guichon says she experienced recently was at a barbecue shop. Credit card in hand, ready to buy, she walked into an empty store full of employees who didn't even look in her direction.

So, she walked out of the store and wrote the owner a letter.

Soon afterward, she received a letter in response from the owner.

"He thanked me for writing to them and enclosed a gift certificate to the store," she says, her satisfaction at the turn of events clearly audible in her voice.

"Now that's a good example of customer service."

Top Five Tips for Effective Complaining

Master kvetcher B.L. Ochman shares her strategies for getting resolution to a complaint

1. Know what you want, when you want it by and what you will do if you don't get it. This will spur them into taking action more quickly.

2. Do your research. Go to the library and use the Internet to find out who licenses the

company and what magazines and publications the business is reported in. Then indicate in your letter, "If I don't get what I want in 10 days, I'm going to send copies of this letter to the licensing bureau and the editors of these magazines."

3. Retain all your receipts, cancelled cheques and records of what you bought. Always write down the name of the person you talked to, and get the name of their supervisor, too.

The only people who don't want to tell you their name are the ones who don't want to be accountable. If the person on the other line is being ornery, Ochman hangs up and calls again until she gets another representative who sounds like they can fix the problem.

"You don't have to settle for what you get," she says.

4. Don't carry on like a crazy person or you'll get treated like one. The minute you lose your temper is when you've lost.

5. Start at the top -- think chairman, company owner or the president. It's the people at the bottom who are causing your problem, so they're not the ones who are going to resolve it for you.

Sources

For more information on the subject, check out the following websites:

www.homefamily.net/index.php/categories/consumersmarts/how_to_complain_effectively/

For unbiased reader reviews and complaints, go to epinion.com, cnet.com and tripadvisor.com