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1. Wield your buying power responsibly Consuming Interests

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There's a major disconnect between consumers and the businesses that compete for our hard-earned dollars. We consumers are better prepared, more resourceful and more capable than ever of making smart spending decisions. With the World Wide Web at our fingertips, hundreds of consumer groups eager to inform us and tens of thousands of companies offering us choice, we can easily take our money and walk.

We were crucial drivers of the economy through recent tough times, including the Sept. 11 atrocities, the war in Iraq and natural disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Isabel. We spent and spent and spent. And yet, we get pitifully little satisfaction.

If you've ever spent hours trying to return merchandise to no avail, if you've ever gotten the runaround while calling customer service and slammed the phone down with disgust, if you've ever scrolled through a corporate Web site in a maddening attempt to find a number to call, you know what I'm saying.

"It makes you wonder, in an age of consumer power, how is it that most consumers feel so powerless?" says Scott M. Broetzmann, president and chief executive officer of the Alexandria, Va.-based Customer Care Measurement & Consulting firm.

In CCMC's 2005 Customer Rage Survey, 70 percent of those questioned said they "experienced rage" when dealing with businesses about problems, 33 percent said service has gotten worse and 46 percent were dissatisfied with the action taken to resolve their problem.

What's more, the U.S. Better Business Bureau logged a whopping 39 million complaints last year, up 13 percent from the year before. Hundreds of consumer complaint sites flourish on the Web.

And the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index inched up slowly in the '90s and then drooped again in recent years.

It all adds up to loads of unhappiness, which is an emotion so very counterproductive to spending money.

Broetzmann says the survey shows that "it's the exception, rather than the rule, that you're going to experience delightful service." But Jan Stringer, president and CEO of the National Business Research Institute in Dallas, says most businesses are well aware that 96 percent of unhappy people will not tell companies that they are unhappy - they just stop buying.

"You almost have to read people's minds these days," says Stringer, who has seen a rise in companies hiring her firm to do customer surveys in order to mine our fickle psyche. "Businesses are finding that it's getting harder and harder to please them."

Could it be that the power has gone to our heads? Who is right? Is it us or is it them?

The thing is, it doesn't matter.

What is infinitely more important is that smart consumers recognize our power - and that smart businesses recognize that customer satisfaction and our intent to return are critical to good financial performance.

This is where I come in.

Consider me an unbiased mediator who believes that we're both a bit guilty for the disconnect. Each week in this space, I'll try to get to the bottom of burning consumer issues, from the how-tos of hiring contractors to writing complaint letters. I'll try to pass on some news you can use and warn you about stuff to avoid. Most of all, I'll try to work out your complaints about substandard service, products and miscommunication.

But before you write in your rant (to consuminginterests@baltsun.com) or dial in your diatribe (to 410-332-6151), keep in mind that I can't solve your child custody or divorce spats, I can't fix what's already in the courts and I won't do drive-by business bashing unless warranted - because I don't automatically believe that the customer is always right. Unlike Wonder Woman, I don't have a magic lasso, so I'll have to hear both sides and sort out some semblance of truth in between.

I'm also not doing this for giggles (although I'd prefer that we have fun along the way), so remember I'm taking down names when you submit a question. No anonymous whiners, please.

With that said, think of me as an advocate for good consumerism.

You should take that to mean that good businesses will do more than what's expected to win our money. They will go above and beyond. They will wow us. In return, good consumers will concede that added power brings added responsibility. Being consummate consumers means we come fully prepared and fearless.

It means we research the best products. We comparison shop not just for big-ticket items like cars, but also for everyday needs like groceries. We read contracts and guarantees carefully, keep good records, and ask when we're not sure.

It means we try to stay on top of scams, fraud and dirty practices while also trying to be responsible about our budget. We do our best to protect our financial identity from harm. We won't tolerate bad service. We won't pay an erroneous bill without question. We won't keep an imperfect product just to avoid the headache of complaining.

But being good consumers also means we won't bounce our checks or skip out on payments. We won't lie and cheat when we're at fault. We won't be shrill, foul and unreasonable when we object. We won't abuse our power.

And when you have done all that and it works, dance the little dance of joy. If you've persuaded your preferred retailer to match a lower price you found elsewhere, if you've ever haggled to get a better contract, if you've ever worked up the nerve to complain and received compensation, an apology or both in return, you know the dance of empowerment.

When all else fails and you're still outraged, disturbed or dissatisfied, don't flip your lid. Step away from the ledge and look me up. Call me. Write me. Share your story.

I want to hear about your happy encounters and your nightmare experiences as well, because like businesses and consumers, there are always good ones and bad.

Together, perhaps, we can solve a problem, answer a question, or learn something new.

Welcome to the new consumer column.

Reach Consuming Interests by e-mail at consuminginterests@baltsun.com or by phone at 410-332-6151.