

# A Time and Place for Grousing

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As a new correspondent in Moscow years ago, I was given the rule about complaints. You were allowed to complain only if three major things went wrong. When the water was only hot on one floor of the apartment building and only cold on the next floor (and the toilet in your flat had become a boiling cauldron), that amounted to one complaint. A headache, a flat tire, a long wait for bread — those were zilch, routine irritations in the Soviet scheme of things. It turned out to be an important lesson for a pampered American in an un-pampered world.

In today's global economy, however, there is a totally different culture for complaints. Artful bellyaching has become a survival skill. And, the harder it becomes to complain ("You're talking to me from Tajikistan?") and the longer it takes to get satisfaction, the angrier customers become in return.

American consumers are so angry that companies are assessing the new level of customer rage. A study by Arizona State University found that 70 per cent of customers who had problems were either extremely or very teed-off as a result of their complaints. Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement and Consulting, which helped with the university analysis, said, "You have to go back more than 40 years (i.e., Ralph Nader's heyday) to find the acrimony you now have between consumers and businesses."

Although there are many companies that care deeply about customer service, too many consider the consumer complaints desk to be a cost center worthy of cutting. So, consumers are fighting back. Mr. Broetzmann, who helps businesses deal with consumer outrage, says that customers become angrier with every hour spent trying to get relief. (Four hours is the average.) But he also says that many consumers say they would be satisfied with respect or an apology rather than, for example, a replacement iPod.

For those who actually want a working product, there is a whine industry growing steadily on the Internet, a whole new universe for self-help complaining. Sites like [The Consumerist](#) celebrate when a company is fined for not serving customers quickly enough. And [GetHuman](#) focuses on how to get a human being on the phone. (If you're desperate, you can even get GetHuman on the phone.)

Ron Burley, author of "Unscrewed: The Consumer's Guide to Getting What You Paid For," argues that any complaint has to be a business transaction. Forget an apology. Forget what he calls the "customer service cattle chute or voice mail jail." Instead, one must quietly and politely explain to a business representative that not resolving this legitimate complaint could affect the company's bottom line. Mr. Burley suggests such tactics as printing fliers about the complaint to hand out on the sidewalk unless the store makes good. Think Clint Eastwood, he advises.

As a veteran of pent-up complaints from my Moscow years, I like thinking about Dale Carnegie. Mr. Carnegie is credited with saying that every dissatisfied customer generates 10 lost sales. That, of course, was before the Internet.

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