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Consumer Vigilantes

Memo to Corporate America: Hell now hath no fury like a customer scorned

by [Jena McGregor](#)

In the annals of customer service, 2007 will go down as the year fed-up consumers finally dropped the hammer. In August a 76-year-old retired nurse named Mona Shaw smashed up a keyboard and a telephone in a Manassas (Va.) Comcast ([CMCSA](#)) office after she says the cable operator failed to install her service properly. During her first visit to the branch outlet, the AARP secretary says she was left sitting on a bench in the hallway for two hours waiting for a manager. She returned, armed with a hammer, and let loose the rallying cry "Have I got your attention now?" Afterward, she was arrested, fined \$345, and became a media sensation, capturing the hearts of frustrated consumers everywhere. (Says Comcast: "We apologize for any customer service issues that Ms. Shaw experienced.")

Three months earlier, in May, Michael Whitford uploaded a video in which he chooses among a golf club, an ax, and a sword before deciding on a sledgehammer as his weapon of choice for bashing his nonfunctioning Macbook to smithereens. In the video, Whitford, a systems engineer from Chandler, Ariz., says that Apple ([AAPL](#)) declined to cover the repair under warranty, citing damage from a spilled liquid. More than 340,000 people have viewed the black-and-white smash-up on YouTube ([GOOG](#)).

Whitford, whom *BusinessWeek* was not able to reach for comment, denies in the video that he spilled anything. In early July, he wrote on his blog that Apple had replaced his laptop. "I'm very happy now," he wrote. "Apple has regained my loyalty."

Meet today's consumer vigilantes. Even if they're not all wielding hammers, many are arming themselves with video cameras, computer keyboards, and mobile devices to launch their own personal forms of insurrection. Frustrated by the usual fix-it options—obediently waiting on hold with Bangalore, gamely chatting online with a scripted robot—more consumers are rebelling against company-prescribed service channels. After getting nowhere with the call center, they're sending "e-mail carpet bombs" to the C-suite, cc-ing the top layer of management with their complaints. When all else fails, a plucky few are going straight to the top after uncovering direct numbers to executive customer-service teams not easily found by mere mortals.

And of course, they're filling up the Web with blogs and videos, leaving behind venom-spewed tales of woe. "There's a certain degree of extremism that's popping up, [a sense of] I'm going to get results, whatever means necessary," says Pete Blackshaw, executive vice-president of Nielsen Online Strategic Services, which measures consumer-generated media. "Companies can brush these off as being atypical, mutant consumers, or they can say there's a very important insight in [their] emotions."

Behind the guerrilla tactics is a growing disconnect between the experience companies promise and customers' perceptions of what they actually get. Consumers already pushed to the brink by evaporating home equity, job insecurity, and rising prices are more apt to snap when hit with long hold times and impenetrable phone trees. Just ask those who responded to our second annual ranking of the best companies for customer service, which uses data from J.D. Power & Associates ([MHP](#)). The average service scores for the brands in our study dipped slightly this year, and about two-thirds of the names that were in both years' studies were lower. (Like *BusinessWeek*, J.D. Power is owned by The McGraw-Hill Companies ([MHP](#)).

EMPOWERED CUSTOMERS

A swell of corporate distrust—exacerbated by high executive pay, accounting lapses, and the offshoring of jobs—has people feeling more at odds with companies than ever before. "[That] has a visceral effect on how customers approach more day-to-day transactions," says Scott Broetzmann, president of Alexandria (Va.) Customer Care Measurement & Consulting (CCMC).

Meanwhile, he says, companies are responding with tighter return policies and increased focus on potential fraud. "You'd have to go back a long way to see the kind of acrimony that you're seeing now."

Technology is aiding the uprising, empowering consumers to do much more to make themselves heard. Now, with the proliferation of online video, they can be seen as well. "You could only get the point across so much with text," says Blackshaw. "As soon as you start adding sight, sound, and motion, you've got a whole other level of [emotion]." More consumers are equipped with mobile Web devices that can find executive e-mail addresses and phone numbers anytime, from any place. At the same time, customer angst sites are no longer just shouting "YourCompanySucks" into the cyberdarkness, but acting as gathering spots for sharing call-center secrets and trouble-shooting tips. And as the audience for more blogs and social-media sites such as Digg reach critical mass, it's easier than ever for consumers to wallpaper the Web with their customer-service nightmares.

Add a powerful media voice and a provocative site title to a blog, and it can have extraordinary impact. Bob Garfield, an *Advertising Age* columnist and National Public Radio host, lit up the blogosphere in October with a site cheekily called ComcastMustDie.com, one of the salvos in what he called his "consumer jihad" against the cable company. After repeated delays with his own service, Garfield, who has hosted a podcast on the site (special guest star Mona "The Hammer Lady" Shaw!), suggested that customers post their account numbers on the blog. Activity on the blog has slowed, but not before dozens of customers followed Garfield's suggestion; many report back, he says, that Comcast called them soon after they posted their account numbers and rants. Garfield can't help but point out the irony. "They've outsourced their worst-case customer-service issues to a blog dedicated to wiping them off the face of the earth."

Marcelo Salup credits Garfield's blog for finally getting Comcast to show up on time when his Internet and cable connections failed. Years of dialing the call center for a technician yielded at least eight missed appointments by Comcast, he says, but a post on ComcastMustDie brought a phone call the next morning and, later, a lead technician who showed up on time. Now, Salup says: "Anytime I have a problem, I also post it on the blog."

Other Comcast customers have used blogs, too. Dan Ortiz says he called the cable provider at least 20 times during his first month as a subscriber to fix dropped Web access and screen-image problems. Then the 26-year-old bike messenger logged on to The Consumerist, a blog with more than 2 million unique visitors a month that's part of Gawker Media's digital empire of snark. There he found a consumer vigilante's gold mine: a list of e-mail addresses for more than 75 Comcast executives and employees, along with instructions for launching what the blog calls its "executive e-mail carpet bomb."

Ortiz got lucky. After firing off a note copying all those names the day before Thanksgiving, he quickly had an inbox full of out-of-

office replies, complete with contact information containing direct numbers. He called a Chicago manager at home, who put his lead technician on the case. Ortiz says a swarm of eight trucks showed up on his block. "Once you get ahold of [executives], they bend over backward for you," he says. He adds that Comcast sent him a tin of gourmet popcorn for Christmas and more than \$700 in credits. Even better, he now has the mobile numbers for the lead technician in his area. "I'm not calling customer service ever again," he says.

The unenviable task of responding to such digital vitriol falls to Rick Germano, Comcast's senior vice-president for customer operations, who took over the role just as Garfield's "revolution" got under way. Germano says reading blogs "is very new, at least to Comcast" and that he's expanding the number of "e-care" representatives to help track and respond to blog comments and e-mails that come in through a new link to his office on Comcast's site. "We're servicing a million customers a day," he says. "An extra hundred doesn't really faze us." A Comcast spokesperson says the company is making efforts to improve customer satisfaction and that it's reacting to other blogs besides Garfield's. Scenarios like Salup and Ortiz's are "not the type of experiences that we want our customers to be having. We're going to respond to our customers wherever and however they have voiced their experiences. Ideally, we'd prefer it to be in the traditional ways."

GOING TO THE TOP

For consumers who really want gold-plated service, little compares to a resolution from "executive customer service." These "Valhallas of customer service," as Ben Popken, editor of *The Consumerist*, has called them, are powerful support reps who may sit at corporate headquarters or even in call centers. Typically, they respond to complaints that first come in to executives; these specialists may also respond to high-profile customers who pose legal or P.R. threats. *The Consumerist*, which instructs customers to try regular support numbers first, has been active in outing such numbers at a couple dozen companies.

Although executive customer service has been around for years, many companies are reluctant to talk about it. "They're usually stealth," says consultant Broetzmann. "Obviously, you don't publish the phone numbers. You don't even tell people they exist." Washington Mutual ([wm](#)) and Circuit City ([CC](#)) declined to provide details to *BusinessWeek* about their executive customer support; Bank of America ([BAC](#)) wouldn't say more "because of operating and security purposes."

Consulting firms that help companies manage call centers and train employees say the online posting of these numbers is having an

effect. Baker Communications, a Houston training firm, started up a course 18 months ago to prepare more people for such executive-service teams. More than 25 companies have sent employees, says Baker CEO Walter Rogers.

The biggest challenges in customer service may be dealing with consumers who are hard to mollify. For some, the sting of a bad experience cuts so deep that it transforms them from a merely upset customer into an activist no longer just looking for a refund. Take Justin Callaway, a Portland (Ore.) freelance video editor. He started his campaign against the wireless company Cingular—now AT&T ([T](#))—in 2006 after a technical glitch that he believes ruined one of his computer speakers. He had the speakers, which contained an amplifier, turned up full blast. When his cell phone rang, he says the speaker next to it made a loud noise and then went dead.

Callaway didn't call customer service right away. But when he looked into the issue for a grad school project months later, he learned more about GSM networks, which Cingular uses, and radio frequency interference, which he believes caused the damage. "I really felt irked that they didn't disclose [it]." He got some friends together to record a tune about Cingular. One of them helped him animate an angry bandit in the shape of the carrier's orange trademark, complete with an AT&T blue-and-white pirate's bandanna and an eye patch shaped like Apple's logo. (Cingular/AT&T is the only wireless provider that offers the iPhone.) His video, "Feeling Cingular," has been viewed more than 37,000 times on YouTube.

About a month after posting the video, Callaway got an e-mail from Bob Steelhammer, then a vice-president for e-commerce at AT&T. "Justin, in the spirit of goodwill, I would like to replace the \$100 computer speakers on your home video-editing system," Steelhammer wrote. "Please let me know what brand and model [they] are." Callaway, who works with video equipment, says that even if there's not damage the phone causes an irritating buzz, and feels AT&T should do more to make consumers aware of the issue. That's why he didn't accept the offer. "It wasn't about the speakers anymore," he says. He's not stopping with the video, either: Callaway is seeking class-action status for a suit against Cingular over subscribers' inability to use their phones in some settings without interference. An AT&T spokesperson says that, due to the proposed litigation, it could not comment, but it works to resolve consumers' issues promptly.

FLIGHT OR FIGHT

Most customers, of course, don't have the time or energy to go that far in their service insurgencies. They want an apology, a human

being who answers the phone, or simply some bottled water after a few hours sitting on the airport tarmac. But that doesn't mean they aren't above a few digs at executives' expense or a call to a cell phone after hours. That's especially true when a direct line to the CEO is the BlackBerry ([RIMM](#)) sitting right there in their laps.

The US Airways ([LCC](#)) plane Ron Dee was on last October had just pulled away from the gate when the pilot came on the loudspeaker to tell the Cleveland-bound passengers that they were 42nd in line for takeoff, Dee recalls. A one- to two-hour delay was expected. Later, thunderstorms delayed the flight even more, prompting another warning: The crew was coming up on its allowable flying time.

Dee, who develops real estate for a restaurant company, flies 100 times a year and is used to delays. That wasn't what upset him so much. "About three hours into the wait on the runway, there's no water left on the plane," he recalls. (A spokesperson for Republic Airways, which operated the regional jet for US Airways, says that records from its vendor show the flight was fully catered and that other beverages would have been available.)

After a quick search on his BlackBerry, Dee found e-mail addresses for Doug Parker, US Airways' CEO; Robert Isom, its COO; and Henri Dawes, its director of customer relations. His first missive, time-stamped 5:59 p.m., fired this shot: "If you get a chance, please call me and we can discuss how we handle customer service in our restaurants. Maybe that would help your company." The next, at 6:40, invoked the JetBlue Airways ([JBLU](#)) incident last February, a weather-induced operational snafu that was followed closely by CEO David Neeleman's departure. "What is that CEO's name from JetBlue [who] resigned? I am going to call information and get his home phone number. Maybe he can get us back to the gate." Says Dee, whose flight was delayed more than four hours: "I probably sent an e-mail every 15 minutes or so for the last two and a half hours" he was on the plane.

He had nothing better to do: The flight was brought back to the gate, and Dee spent the night in a Philadelphia hotel he paid for himself. He never spoke to Dawes, but he did get three vouchers totaling \$425. Would he use the BlackBerry as a stalking device the next time he's stuck on the runway? "Absolutely," he says. "You guys as a company, regardless of who you are, exist because of me and my fellow paying passengers."

Links

The customer's always...smarter?

A recent study by market research firm Yankelovich finds that more than half of American adults think they know more about the products and services they shop for than the people helping them in the stores. The December study, "Consumers in Control: Customer Service in the Age of Consumer Empowerment," found that nearly 4 in 10 believe they know how to get what they need from customer service, deploying phone system workarounds to navigate phone tree mazes. No matter how savvy consumers may be, 27% said they'd be willing to pay to speak to a live representative.

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[McGregor](#) is *BusinessWeek's* management editor.

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