

BUSINESS

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Consummate Consumer

Customer Wishes By the Dozen

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So it's another New Year's Day, time to decompress from the holidays, take stock of our lives, face up to flaws — and promise ourselves to try really, really hard to change them in the coming year.

What a fleeting fancy, those self-improvement promises! As the well-known pundit Anonymous once said of New Year's resolutions, "They go in one year and out the other."

But resolutions can be fun. Particularly when you're not taking them so personally. Such as when, in the spirit of holiday giving, you make New Year's resolutions for others.

So shelve the self-flagellation mentality until tomorrow (when probably you

should add "stop procrastinating" to your resolutions). Today, just think about the faults, flaws and failures of others. And, in this column, "others" are the retailers, manufacturers, advertisers, customer-service reps, even the feds — everyone on the other side of the counter, on the other end of the telephone line, behind the bills and junk mail, who needs a New Year's nudge to do the right thing for consumers.

For the past month, readers have responded to this column's requests for just such resolutions — changes consumers want to see in the marketplace. (You didn't send yours in yet, huh? Move "stop procrastinating" to the top of your list and send 'em anyway. January's a long cold

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How 'They' Can Resolve to Give Customers a Happier New Year

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month.)

Here are a dozen to consider:

1. When you mess up, 'fess up. "Many consumers want apologies, but they rarely get them," said Scott Broetzmann, who has been on the customer side of the unapologetic retailer himself. As president of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, Broetzmann conducts annual customer-rage surveys and recently studied corporate apologies. What he's found is that few companies are prepared to offer an apology. One of the firm's recent surveys found that 59 percent of consumers wanted an apology, but only 25 percent got one. In a survey where callers from the firm pretended to be wronged customers, "two-thirds of companies had to be asked several times for an apology before offering one," he said.

So, Corporate America: When you don't

show up, when the order arrives late, when your product doesn't work, when you've overcharged, when the bill's botched — apologize. (FYI: It sounds something like this — "We're sorry. . . . You're right.")

2. Nix the name game. "Safeway could promise to stop making its overworked checkers thank each customer by name," suggests Carole Sargent, a literary consultant in Alexandria who came up with a long list of resolutions (more from her below). "It's just sad to hear them try to pronounce 'Izquierdo,' 'Olejniczak' or my former last name, 'Fungaroli.' The executive who came up with this faux-friendly scheme was probably named Williams."

3. "No more rebates" is the vow Land-over reader Joe Moore said he'd like to see on the resolutions list of big electronics and office retailers "like Circuit City, Best Buy, Office Depot." And Manassas reader Soni Hanson includes manufacturers: "If only manufacturers would get rid of mail-

in rebates! Please just lower the price or have a regular sale. . . . It's such an outdated mechanism in this age of electronic commerce."

Moore figures rebates are analogous to the customer making a no-interest loan to the retailer — and he's right. You pay full price for a product advertised for a "sale" price and then wait weeks to get back the difference. But the "loan," he said, is unlike any ordinary loan: The borrower has no deadline to repay it; the lender (consumer) faces an unforgiving deadline and strict paperwork conditions for applying to get his money back; and even if deadline and conditions are met, the borrower sometimes never pays it back.

4. A little help here? Marian Drohan of Germantown bristles at department stores that don't staff enough cash registers. They're so understaffed that there's no one to ask for help, and when she's ready to buy something she can't find an employee at a cash register nearby. "I'm old and have tired legs," Drohan said. "By the time I've walked past two vacant cash register places, I merely put the items I would have bought back on the rack. Sometimes I'm tempted to scream out, 'Does anyone want to take my money?'"

5. Where are you? Businesses should "promise to put their street numbers in large size on the front of their buildings, just like houses," Sargent said.

6. O! the humanity! Anna Knight, a reader in Rowlett, Tex., asks that companies give consumers easier access to help from real live people. Whether it's making their customer-service answering system easier to navigate or posting on their Web site how to contact an actual person, "the bottom line," she said, "is let the customer speak with a human being."

7. To your health. Charleston, Ill., reader Becker Saumer Spoor suggests the federal



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government initiate "affordable, quality, comprehensive health care for all Americans . . . maybe a constitutional-amendment guarantee like we helped Iraq create for all Iraqis?"

8. Printer blues. Charge a fair price for ink cartridges, Sargent advises Hewlett-Packard and the other computer printer manufacturers. "This could be the centerpiece of a bold advertising campaign designed to woo back customers," she added.

9. Prevent identity theft. Stop asking customers for Social Security numbers as IDs, suggests a reader too concerned about privacy to be identified.

10. For safety's sake! Chantilly reader James F. Hoebel asks the media to be more "fire-safety conscious in stories and advertisements" — as in recent holidays ads showing candles surrounded by combustible leaves. Hoebel, who used to serve as chief engineer for fire safety with the Consumer Product Safety Commission, added that manufacturers and retailers should "choose only fabrics that meet the children's sleepwear standard for all children's

clothing" and "offer consumers an informed choice by providing appropriate information about clothing fire resistance."

11. Slam spam. Instead of encouraging unsolicited commercial e-mails, the feds ought to create a Do Not Spam Registry just like the Do Not Call Registry that has taken the wind out of telemarketing, suggested several e-mailers.

12. Make an appointment. Home service companies, from the cable-TV repairs to telephone installations, should accept that most people work for a living and "begin actually making appointments with customers instead of asking them to be available all day on a date it might or might not appear," Sargent said.

Have a great New Year!

Got resolutions, questions or comments? A consumer complaint? E-mail details to consumer@washpost.com or write to Don Oldenburg, The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071. Because of the volume of mail, personal replies are not always possible.