

Consumer Reports magazine: July 2011

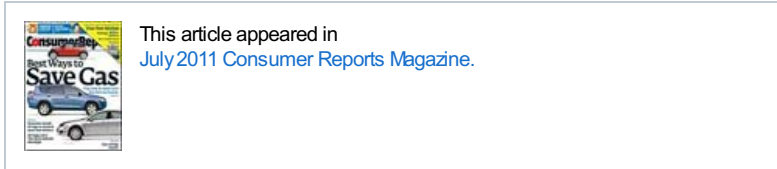
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Are consumers too whiny?

Last reviewed: July 2011



The jury's out. Among those saying yea is Patrick Maguire, author of the blog "I'm Your Server Not Your Servant." "Ill-mannered adults are breeding, modeling, and enabling a whole new generation of arrogant, narcissistic, selfish humans who think the world revolves around them," he says. "If everyone worked a mandatory six-month stint in customer service before receiving a high-school diploma, the world would be a much better place."

But Emily Yellin, author of "Your Call Is (Not That) Important to Us" (Free Press, 2009), says that people are probably no less civil to one another than in the past. It's just that today everyone has a bigger megaphone, so more people see and hear the incivility. The anonymity afforded by the Internet, she says, allows people to be far less polite than they would be face-to-face. But Yellin notes that Americans were so rude to phone operators at the turn of the 20th century that laws had to be passed to keep customers from swearing at them.

Scott M. Broetzmann, president and CEO of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, doesn't think consumers are asking for too much. His company conducts customer-rage studies in collaboration with Arizona State University's Center for Service Leadership. Usually, Broetzmann says, wronged customers just want the problem fixed, plus a measure of "psychological currency."

Data from ASU's rage studies covering 2003 to 2007 show that 78 percent of consumers want an assurance that the problem won't recur or an explanation as to why it happened in the first place, and 70 percent want the company to thank them for their business. But few people said they got their wish. For instance, 25 percent got an apology, 20 percent, an explanation; and 17 percent, a thank-you.

Judging by our survey results, many consumers are actually quite patient. Although 2 percent of respondents admit to becoming very frustrated by any wait on the phone, 37 percent said that they're willing to hold for 6 to 10 minutes, and 9 percent said they were fine holding for 20 minutes or more.

People seem even more willing to forgive a cable guy or appliance repairer who doesn't show up when promised. Thirty-seven percent of those surveyed said they'd wait 30 to 59 minutes beyond the scheduled appointment window before considering the delay unacceptable; 18 percent said they'd accept a 1- or 2-hour delay, and 7 percent said they'd tolerate a wait of 2 or more hours.

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