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The Ultimate 'May I Speak to Your Supervisor?'

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Bernice McTigue experienced one of those "senior moments" in September, mixing up her commas and periods when paying her Verizon bill. Instead of \$68.58, she sent the phone company \$6,858.

Yeah, it's kind of funny -- unless you're the one who made the mistake. A silly mistake that's easily fixed? You'd think. But that lost period was the start of an upsetting month for Bea and William McTigue.

Bea made repeated calls to Verizon trying to straighten out her error. Verizon customer service representatives promised to call back and didn't, she says. They said fixing the problem was up to "financial" and someone there would call her back, but no one did, she says.

All she wanted was a refund -- proof that she wasn't out the \$6,000-plus -- and maybe a customer service rep to reassure her that everything would be okay. "One of those customer service ladies told me I should be more careful in the future," says McTigue, a Fort Washington retiree. "Gee whiz, I didn't know that."

Verizon spokesman Harry Mitchell says its customer call centers handle more than 3.5 million customer calls each day. "A comparative few calls result in customer complaints," he says. "When a customer does have a concern or complaint, the vast majority of them are handled in a professional and timely manner by the Verizon service representatives taking the initial call."

Not this time. Bea's son, Mickey McTigue, says his parents "called Verizon at least 10 times."

Bea finally got some good advice: File an "executive complaint."

Most consumers know nothing about executive complaints. They don't know that larger corporations like automakers, big utilities and other Fortune 500 companies usually have a formalized process for complaints that are addressed to corporate bigwigs or that threaten realistic legal action, concern an obvious error, bad policy or a legitimate claim to remedial action.

Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, an Alexandria firm that studies customer service, says only about 5 percent of customers "escalate their complaints" beyond the first step. Less than 1 percent get to the executive complaint process. Depending on the complaint, some companies then provide priority handling by people in a position to resolve the problem quickly.

Mitchell says unsatisfied customers who exhaust the normal complaint process at Verizon and insist on "a higher-level appeal" are usually referred not to the executive complaint team but to its "special customer relations group." It reviews the case and works with "the local manager team to resolve the issue." That's where McTigue started getting a resolution.

Other firms and organizations handle executive complaints differently. AARP, for instance, has a dedicated staff that works with top executives to determine how to resolve them. Of 5 million e-mails, letters and phone calls AARP handles each year, about 15,000 are executive complaints.

"Especially if it is a complaint regarding their membership or where AARP has taken on an issue," says Ava J. Baker, director of member services, "those complaints are high priority."

When Bea McTigue did it, she first asked to speak to a "first-line or second-line supervisor," then said, "I'm filing an executive complaint."

Bea now calls those "the magic words." The day she used them, her complaint was turned over to someone at a higher corporate altitude than customer service.

"She talked to me as though we were both from the same planet and actually called when she promised," says Bea. She got her a refund check within a week.

FOR MORE INFO

- For Verizon's online customer service: www.verizon.com or check your phone book.
- AARP's Web site is at www.aarp.org.

Got questions? A consumer complaint? A helpful tip? E-mail details to oldenburgd@washpost.com or write Don Oldenburg, The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071.

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