

Making complaints work for your business

No matter how brilliant your business is, at some stage someone is going to complain. The key to a successful company is how it and its employees choose to deal with those complaints. Research by the Direct Selling Educational Foundation shows that through word-of-mouth alone, one person's complaint will reach 1,560 people.



In this digital age, people often use social media platforms to complain and because posts can go viral, they have the potential to really damage a brand's reputation. "When you have that many people talking about a complaint regarding your company, you also want a similar number of people talking about, not only how the complaint was handled, but how well it was handled," Antonia Oakes head: customer experience, customer and responsible business at Mutual & Federal Insurance says.

There are basic principles that need to be in place when implementing an effective customer complaints strategy. They are:

- Satisfying customers should be everyone's priority, including the executive leadership.
- Excellent organisations view customer concerns and complaints as opportunities for improvement, not as problems.
- World-class brands make it easy for customers to complain.
- World-class leaders make it easy for employees to solve problems.
- Effective senior management uses customer feedback for planning and communication with employees.
- Well-managed service recovery improves the bottom line.
- Understand that the company needs the customer more than the customer needs the company.

"A strong complaint-management process is underpinned by six building blocks, all of which are in line with the Treating Customers Fairly legislation," Oakes says. These six building blocks are: fairness; objectivity and independence; simplicity and accessibility; timeous responsiveness and efficiency; speed and proportionality and participation and social inclusion.

The impact of social media

Digital data accessible via social media platforms such as Hello Peter, Facebook and Twitter makes it possible to monitor customer queries and address customer complaints in real time. In the last few years, brands have recognised the importance of the employees whose job it is to monitor social media platforms. Today these team members should be highly trained in customer service and with sharply honed skills to act as the brand's watchdog. They have the 'outside insights', i.e. an external perspective and can relate to both the customer and the brand.

Turning setbacks into comebacks

Customers often complain when they want to see change happen – this means they would like to remain a customer and want you to find a solution that makes it easier for them. “If you can make the changes they're looking to see, you'll most likely turn their complaints into positive reviews—having them as a customer for life and one of your top promoters,” Oakes says.

Once you have successfully resolved the complaint, the onus is on the company to get the word out that an unhappy customer has been turned into a happy one. This will encourage other customers to come forward if they have any negative experience with your company, rather than simply moving their business to a rival company.

Research on complaints carried out by British Airways revealed that customers whose complaints were dealt with efficiently and politely, felt even more positive about the company than they did when everything was right in the first place.

“Listening to the voice of the customer, broker and the employee can lead to a host of insights that management can turn to the benefit of the company. A customer complaint is simply another opportunity to fix something that is not working and build your brand in the process,” Oakes concludes.

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