



Why You Should be Happy When Somebody Complains

PEOPLE WHO DON'T CARE DON'T COMPLAIN; THEY JUST QUIETLY LEAVE. ALTHOUGH IT'S GREAT TO HAVE HAPPY CLIENTS, IT'S ALSO GOOD TO HEAR AN OCCASIONAL COMPLAINT. CONSIDER EACH TO BE AN OPPORTUNITY.

Allow me to share an example with you. I noticed that the screen on my smart phone had a circular area about the size of a quarter on which the stylus made no mark. Thinking it was a problem with the phone, I took it back to a T-Mobile store. The problem was confirmed and the company sent me a replacement. The replacement had the same problem! You may think this is a story about T-Mobile, but it's not.

What I found, following a bit of experimentation, was that both the old phone and the new phone were fine. The stylus was fine. The problem turned out to be the protective case from Spigen. When I wrote to Spigen and explained the problem, I expected little. After all, the case cost less than \$20 and I hadn't noticed the problem for nearly 3 months.

The next day, I received an e-mail from Spigen asking for more information. We exchanged a few messages, I sent a screen shot, and the customer service department promised to send a replacement that wouldn't cause the same problem. Two days after that, the replacement arrived and — sure enough — it didn't cause the problem.

Clearly this episode cost Spigen far more than whatever profit they made on the original sale, but they did what was right and they even thanked me for letting them do it!

A Complaint is a Gift by Janelle Barlow and Claus Møller addresses the point that complaints are to be welcomed. It's a worthwhile and challenging book to read. Worthwhile because it will encourage you to modify your mindset about complaints. Challenging because it will ques-



tion the way you may think about customers and clients today.

Barlow explains that complaints are helpful because they tell you clearly what's wrong with your product or service, because they often lead to ideas for new products and services, and because they illustrate concerns that are important to people who are willing to spend money with you.

Complaints come from clients who want you to improve; they still want to do business with you. They still care about the business relationship. Mull that over for a moment and you'll fully comprehend this truth: Those who have given up

completely on a company will not reach out to them; they'll just find another supplier for the product or service. So when someone who does business with you complains, you have an opportunity to improve something.

Complaints Happen

INSTINCTIVELY, WE DON'T THINK OF A COMPLAINT AS SOMETHING TO BE WELCOMED.

We consider complaints to be bad. When nobody complains, so we may think, everything must be good. That may be true, but it also may be that the people you consider to be loyal clients have given up on you or that they no longer care about the business relationship.

If you're in business, there will be complaints. That is a given because we can't please everyone all the time. What's important is the proper handling of problems when they occur.

Barlow and Møller even have a step-by-step process that they recommend for dealing with problems.

- **Thank** the person who complained and say that you appreciate the time required to share the information with you.
- **Explain** why you're saying thank you: It's because you care about the relationship and the complaint provides an opportunity for you to resolve any problems.
- **Apologize.** This should go without saying. Acknowledge the fact that your client is unhappy. You don't necessarily have to admit that the problem was your fault (although, if

it was, that wouldn't hurt); just state that you understand the client is unhappy and that you're sorry.

- **Promise** to do whatever you can to help solve the problem. (Hold this thought in the back of your mind as you read the rest of the list.)
- **Ask** for specific details. What did the client expect? What happened? Your goal is to completely understand what has caused the client to be unhappy with your product or service.
- Remembering that you promised to do whatever you can to solve the problem, **do it**. Focus on those things that are within your control and fix them. If some or all of the problem isn't within your control, explain that. This doesn't give you permission to push the blame onto some other department; if the problem is something you or your company can remedy, you own the problem until it has been resolved.
- **Ask** if the client feels that the complaint is being addressed. If not, look back over the list try again.
- And finally, **learn from the situation**. What can you do to avoid a repetition of the problem? Did the complaint contain an idea that could lead to a new product or service?

That's why a complaint is really a gift. Just as we thank someone who gives us a birthday gift, we should thank someone who brings us a complaint. They have given us something valuable, something useful, something that can help make our business stronger and more profitable — and we should treat their complaint as the gift that it really is.

Even knowing this, it's still a difficult concept to internalize. The situation more difficult when we consider the people who will provide feedback about our business fall into just two groups:

- **Those who are unhappy.** They will express their dismay in person, by phone, or on the Web. It's difficult to consider the complaint a gift, particularly when they use social media to complain. But in some ways, this is an even better gift because it provides an opportunity



to demonstrate to a wider audience that you really do care about providing the best product or service.

- **Those you bribe:** Offer a discount on the next order when clients complete an opinion survey and you'll receive feedback. Because of the discount sweetener, the survey may not be as accurate as you'd like.

A third group, happy clients, rarely speak up. They may simply feel that you're doing what they've paid you to do. Occasionally, though, an extremely happy client will send a thank-you note.

So we have to accept the fact that many messages we receive from clients will be negative. Complaints are simply a normal part of business and personal relationships. When somebody complains, they want you to do better because they value the relationship. If someone stops complaining, it's likely that they've given up and will soon take their business elsewhere.

Accepting the concept of complaints as gifts doesn't come naturally to anyone. But if we listen carefully to what's being said and approach the complaint as a request to fix something that's not working properly, it's easier to understand.

If one person has taken the time to complain about your product or service, it's likely that there are others who are just suffering silently while looking for someone else to take their business.

Exceeding Expectations

RECENTLY I NEEDED TO CONTACT MAILCHIMP BECAUSE I HAD A QUESTION ABOUT HOW TO ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING A CLIENT WANTED TO DO WITH THE SERVICE. THE PERSON WHO RESPONDED TO MY QUESTION EXPLAINED THAT THE DESIRED FUNCTIONALITY WASN'T AVAILABLE, BUT THEN WENT ON TO EXPLAIN THREE DIFFERENT WAYS THAT I COULD ACHIEVE THE DESIRED RESULT.

Most customer service representatives would stop there and consider it a job well done, but the person who responded to my question then answered what would have been my next questions.

That reminded me of an article by Matthew Dixon, Karen Freeman, and Nicholas Toman, in *Harvard Business Review* a few years ago. In the article, "Stop Trying to Delight Your Customers", the authors explain the importance of doing more than just resolving the current issue by heading off the next one.

"By far the biggest cause of excessive customer effort is the need to call back. Many companies believe they're performing well in this regard, because they have strong first-contact-resolution (FCR) scores. However, 22% of repeat calls involve downstream issues related to the problem that prompted the original call, even if that problem itself was adequately addressed the first time around."

While the advice in this article applies to all sorts of business interactions with clients, it is particularly important when the communication involves a complaint. Companies "need to realize that customers gauge the effort they expend not just in terms of how an individual call is handled but also according to how the company manages evolving service events ... that typically require several calls.

A Complaint is a Gift is available in paperback, Audible, and ebook formats. [📖](#)



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