

CONSUMER COMPLAINING: WHAT RESPONSES DO CONSUMERS
EXPECT FROM MANAGERS

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One obvious measurement of consumer dissatisfaction is the number of complaints directed toward businesses. The volume of such complaints has increased substantially in recent years. Overt complaining behavior is important from a business perspective since complaints serve as important feedback from the marketplace concerning a company's offerings and actions while offering an opportunity to reduce dissatisfaction. From a consumer perspective, complaints represent an important form of communication. Consumer expectations and company responses affect attitudes toward the company and business in general.

The focus of our study is on the consumer and its purpose is to address the following questions that have implications for marketing managers:

1. Do consumers perceive complaints as valid?
2. What response would be necessary in order to achieve satisfaction?
3. What are consumers' expectations that they will receive the desired response?
4. Which company representative should respond?
5. Do managers give consumers what they want?

A graphically-dispersed sample of 122 consumers was personally interviewed after reading five complaint letters selected from the files of a Fortune 500 company that sells building materials used for new construction and remodeling, such as paneling and plywood. Two letters had obvious solutions, two had solutions that were not obvious and one letter contained an obviously inflated request. Consumers were asked to state their expectations and requirements concerning company responses. Forty managers at the company were shown the same letters and asked to provide a detailed account of what they perceived to be an appropriate response.

The results of the study are indicative of a general level of consumer optimism concerning the complaint resolution process. The consumers overwhelmingly expressed the necessity for the company to respond to each letter. This was true even for the letter that contained the inflated request. It appears that when dissatisfaction is manifested in the form of a complaint letter, consumers believe that a response is necessary.

A large group of consumers (61.4%) expected the company response to be by letter while 38.6% expected personal contact. An explanation and/or apology were the two most desired responses although replacement, refund and suggestions on how to solve the problem were also important to consumers.

The consumers did not have strong preferences concerning which corporate employee should respond. Almost 50% had no preference. 41.2% wanted a

manager, sales representative or customer service representative to respond. Perhaps consumers viewed such employees as being closer to the problem. Only 11.9% wanted a top executive to respond.

There was a strong tendency for managers to give consumers what they wanted or more. This occurred in 65.5% of the cases. This was true even for the inflated request. This liberal response pattern is supportive of the overall level of consumer optimism about receiving a satisfactory response. It may be that the act of writing and sending a complaint letter to a company represents a strong commitment on the part of the consumer to obtain satisfaction. Or they may feel that their complaint is reasonable and will be perceived similarly and acted upon favorably by managers.

On the other hand, managers may find it easier to satisfy their personal goals by giving a liberal response designed to make sure the consumer is satisfied, rather than risk consumer dissatisfaction and face possible review by top management when the irate consumer presses the case.