

## How to Complain and Get Results

The blender does not blend. Your vacation was spoiled by a late flight. Or the cabinet you bought is as sturdy as wet cardboard.

When products or services fail, it's easy to feel as if your complaints to the company responsible disappear into a black hole. While there are no magic words, there are a few tricks to help your complaint get a friendlier reading. All it takes is a little finesse, and some good documentation.

Vent, then write

“Deal with your emotions,” Meg Marco, executive editor of Consumerist, which is a part of Consumer Reports, said. The most effective letters of complaint are confident and calm, so do not make threats or write in uppercase letters as if you were shouting.

It may feel like ranting helps you communicate how unhappy you are, but stick to the relevant details. Keep your emotions — and sarcasm — in check, or you run the risk of turning your reader against you. Get the shouting out of your system first, then sit down to write.

Be clear about what you want

State your “conditions of satisfaction,” C. William Crutcher, president of the National Customer Service Association, wrote in an email. What are you expecting from the company? Be reasonable, though. The remedy you seek should be proportionate to the problem you experienced. If you had a terrible meal at a restaurant, ask for a refund or credit to a future dinner.

Don't, however, ask for a brand new car just because the tail light went out a month after you drove it off the lot.

Be focused and think about what you want, Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist and a professor emerita of psychology and marketing at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, wrote in an email. Do you want the company to improve, get compensation for your issue or simply complain?

Jennifer Thomas, a leadership consultant and co-writer of "When Sorry Isn't Enough," suggested treating your demand for a remedy like a salary negotiation: Don't be the first to name your price. Wait and see what they offer.

"If it's insufficient, then you politely tell them that it's inadequate in your eyes," she wrote in an email.

Be succinct

Go light on the details and don't treat your letter like a legal brief with multiple exhibits. "You don't need to paste the whole chat log," Ms. Marco said.

The first paragraph of your letter or email should be no more than seven lines.

"Basically the first paragraph is the only thing that is going to get read carefully," said John A. Goodman, vice chairman of Customer Care

Measurement and Consulting in Alexandria, Va. “Once you have more than seven lines or bullet points, everybody sees gray.”

Your letter should be no more than a page, single-spaced, Ms. Thomas wrote. Be specific about dates, times, names and locations. Attach documentation if necessary or a list of other items you can provide if they’re requested. Photos are helpful.

If you are at loss for words, Consumerist has a sample complaint letter.

Write a ‘complaint sandwich’

Guy Winch, a psychologist in Manhattan and author of “The Squeaky Wheel: Complaining the Right Way to Get Results and Improve Your Relationships and Enhance Self-Esteem,” recommended a layered approach.

Your opening line can be something positive about how long you’ve been a customer or why you like a company’s product. It signals you are being measured, he said.

The “lean meat” of the sandwich should be your complaint, presenting the relevant details as briefly as possible. The last layer should end on a positive note such as “I really hope you can resolve this issue for me” or “I hope to continue my relationship with the company.”

Avoid these mistakes

Don’t exaggerate your history as a customer as a way to get attention. Customer service representatives can find your purchase history.

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Avoid foul language. It will erode your credibility.

Don't ask to be compensated for lost time. You may have wasted several hours on a defective product or waiting for a service, but demanding to be reimbursed for it will be seen as being unreasonable, Mr. Goodman said.

Keep track

Mr. Goodman recommended getting the name of anyone who responds (even it's just a first name) and note any case number assigned to your complaint. If you don't get one, ask for it. You want some way to reference your issue in the future, without explaining your issue all over again. You also want to make sure you have records of who promised what and when, so no one can pretend those conversations never happened.

Consider escalating

An email or web-based form you complete will get routed to a low-level customer care center or outside contractor, Mr. Goodman said.

To improve the chances of a response, mail or email your complaint to the company's president or other executives. You can search online for company contacts and addresses and on the professional networking site LinkedIn, he said.

Consumerist calls this approach the Executive Email Carpet Bomb, a well-written message to the right group of corporate executives. Keep it short, polite and use it as a last resort. Even if the executive themselves doesn't address it, they'll likely forward it to an assistant or customer service manager who will.

## Avoid complaining on social media

It may be tempting to blast a company on its Facebook page or on Twitter, but doing so will not necessarily fix your problem.

“Social media is really about shaming the company into taking action,” Ms. Yarrow wrote. “If you think the company is honorable and will help if they know the trouble they’ve caused, don’t use social media.”

If direct contact fails, post on rating sites like Yelp or Angie’s List, where other consumers will look for feedback on the company that’s wronged you, Ms. Yarrow wrote. Consider the company’s Twitter or Facebook as a last resort. Check their accounts first to make sure they actually conduct customer service there. Many companies have special accounts for support, while others just direct customers to call or email instead.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/15/smarter-living/consumer-complaint-writing-letter.html>