

What Do Customers Want When They Complain?

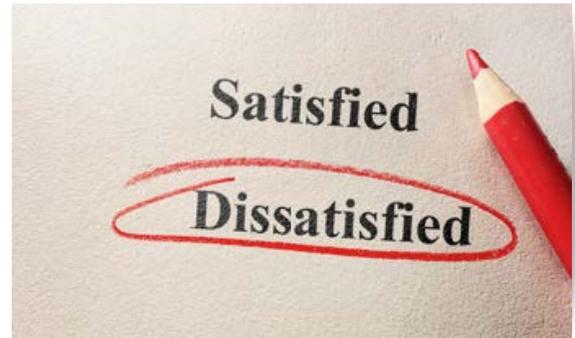
Janelle Barlow, April, 2023. ©All rights reserved.



Every customer is unique just as every person is a singular entity. This means we all want different things when we complain. We even want different things at different times of the day, depending on whether we are hungry, tired, or rushed. We are, in short, a basket of varying emotions, wants, and needs.

What we want is also affected by which country we inhabit. Our culture may have taught us to "grin and bear it," or we have learned from past experience that complaining does little good. So what we want may be minimal because getting rejected is easier to bear when we have low expectations

But one thing we know for sure is that many customers are dissatisfied with how their complaints are handled and resolved. Surprisingly, with all the attention paid to customer satisfaction, most businesses aren't very good at complaint handling.



This dissatisfaction may not relate to whether customers were compensated for their time, given a replacement product, or a coupon for a return visit. Satisfaction frequently has little to do with what complaining customers are given. More likely, it has to do with how they were treated or whether they were shown genuine human empathy. As Psychologist Carl Rogers said many years ago, "A high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most potent factor in bringing about change and learning." All too often, complaining customers are treated not as someone positive for the organization, but rather as a nuisance or irritant.

Consider the following statistics:

- In one widely cited study in the Journal of Marketing, only 32% of customers were completely satisfied with how their complaints were handled.
- In another study, conducted by Christopher Hart, cited in Harvard Business Review, more than 50% of customers reported walking away from complaint situations feeling worse than if they had never complained in the first place.
- A National Consumer Study sponsored by the US Office of Consumer Affairs, reports that complaining customers indicate half of the dissatisfaction they remember comes from the response to their complaints, not the initial failure of products or services.
- Multiple studies (conducted by or cited by TARP Industry Specific Data) reveal that satisfaction plays a large role in forming customer loyalty. Once a customer is willing to come back to do business with you again, that loyalty generated by effective handling of complaints, plays an even bigger role in repurchase behavior. In one study, TARP reports that purchasers of large-ticket items are more likely to repurchase by a rate of 80% when their complaints are handled satisfactorily, compared to a repurchase rate of 40% when complaints are not handled well.
- Take the example of a Hong Kong based airline. With a carefully controlled study, it found the language their representatives used to settle lost luggage claims was more important than whether their luggage was actually returned in a timely manner. Receiving compensation also played a limited role in determining whether the airline's passengers would fly with them again. Once the passenger had to fill out a Lost Baggage form, they responded very positively to being shown some sympathy for the pickle they were in caused by delayed luggage. This is a finding that should make all managers, whether in the airline industry or not, sit up and pay attention.

Complaint situations almost always have strong emotions attached to them. Many customers are nervous and dubious about speaking up. Their experience perhaps tells them they are probably wasting their time and breath to say anything at all. Complaining is an inherently uncomfortable situation. For this reason alone customers need to be treated with empathy.

Empathy costs little to deliver. It does mean hiring people who handle complaints who are in touch with their natural empathy. These service employees also need to know showing understanding and sympathy is expected of them. Many business people think they need to “give the storeaway” when customers face problems—or those customers won’t return.

They don’t.

People tell me from all corners of the world that their customers are different. “No,” they will say, “our customers are only satisfied if we give them something. So, that’s

what we do.” I ask them how their customers learned to insist on getting something—such as not being charged for a meal when some small item wasn’t to their liking, or a free stay overnight in a hotel when customers report being dissatisfied. The answer I hear is that giving the customer something is their policy. They may have read that giving free things is a good approach to complaint handling. They don’t like it, but they think it’s the only way to keep their customers.

Unfortunately, what they have done is to teach their customers to be picky about products and services. The customers know they’ll get something in return if they complain. Are these customers different, or just customers who have been taught to behave a certain way with that business?

What’s the reality? Here’s what most customers say, over and over again, they want when they complain:

- They want to be believed.
- They want fair settlements.
- They want reasonable and honest explanations if their complaint can’t be handled in the way they would prefer.
- They want their complaints settled quickly.
- They want to talk with a minimum number of people to resolve their situation. They don’t want to be forced to call another number or write a complaint on a web page.
- They want someone to take responsibility if a mistake was made.
- They want some sympathy for the situation they are in.
- Finally, they want a heart-felt apology.

None of these wishes are unreasonable; nor will they break an organization financially. If these desires are met, organizations are going to find themselves with satisfied—and loyal—customers, even after something has gone wrong.

Start with the idea that a complaint is a gift, and you will no doubt begin to think your way through to a different position about complaint handling!