



More Feedback is Much Better Than No Feedback



**Janelle Barlow, June, 2023.
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Normally when I tell company leaders they should be looking for more complaints, not fewer, I see shocked looks on their faces. It's a look with which I am well acquainted. Some will say, "Wait a minute. We want fewer complaints, not more."

At first glance, fewer complaints seem desirable. But when managers begin to think about the potential loss of non-complaining customers, they begin to see that more feedback is better than no feedback.



The formula is quite simple. When you dissatisfy your customers, if they can tell you about it and give you a chance to fix the situation, you can use this opportunity to keep them with you. Or you or your team of Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) can discourage complaints so they are never brought to the attention of someone who can do something. You cannot give customers what they expect or treat them fairly if you don't know what is bothering them.

With no complaints, based on what they hear, a manager might conclude that all is well with the world. After all, if no one complains, there's no reason for a manager to think there are any problems.

Some large organizations set up reward policies so that managers of branch operations who get the fewest complaints get monetary rewards. Some are rewarded with vacations. I've experienced the results of these reward systems in hotels all over the world.

If I walk up to the front desk and say, "I have a complaint. I filled out your feedback form and would like you to give it to your manager," I'm thanked for completing the form. However, when walking away, I have turned back to see clerks tear up the form I just handed to them.

I know what's going on in organizations like this. The managers have announced in irritation that they are sick and tired of getting so many complaints. And their staff learns not to pass along any complaints to their managers. In these situations, it's likely that corporate offices have set up reward systems to grant bonuses to those managers whose complaints numbers are low.

Read even a few articles on customer service and you will learn that most dissatisfied customers don't complain. As many as two-thirds of unhappy customers don't report dissatisfaction, and the third that speak up mostly complain to someone who will not pass the information up the line. It's one thing to discourage complaints; it's another to get them and then not have them given to the senior person responsible for getting and retaining customers.

Imagine a hypothetical situation in your organization: One of your customers has experienced something that, by any measure, would simply be an irritant. Suppose someone on your staff did not tell a customer to bring specific information for their appointment. So, when they arrived, the customer didn't have the essential information needed for a scheduled meeting.

From your company's point of view, it would be helpful to know how often this happens. There is no way to fix this if no one knows about it. A simple checklist used by staff when they confirm reservations would make it more likely that they would remind the client what they need to bring with them. If this "small issue" isn't fixed, several booked appointments may not be kept because people don't always remember what they need to bring for a consultation. Customers will walk away dissatisfied – perhaps even blaming themselves for not bringing the required information.

The receptionist asks the arriving client whether they have their financial folder with them. They don't. So, the customer asks the receptionist why someone didn't remind them to be sure to bring their financial documents to them. To the customer that question was their way of complaining. Without their necessary documents, the client leaves without staying for the consultation. The receptionist hears the question, "Why didn't someone tell me to bring the documents," as a question and not a complaint.

The critical questions are whether the receptionist tells the analyst why the client left, and would the senior manager of the financial agency find out why the client left? There's a good chance the receptionist will not tell anyone why the client walked away. The receptionist will simply cancel the appointment or call it a "no show."

The people who need to know about internal communication processes do not learn they have a practice that potentially costs them customers. Indeed, in this case, whatever commission the client would be charged for a consultation would not be earned by the agency.

There are dozens of ways to get your customers to speak up. And there are an equal number of reasons how to get your staff to report complaints to people who would benefit from knowing them.

Janelle has witnessed mixed messages managers send to their call center teams. She has heard managers say, "I'm sick and tired of hearing about that issue. Just fix it." Unfortunately, the "fix it" becomes simply not telling a manager about the complaint.

It's advantageous to create a complaint-friendly environment that welcomes customer complaints reported to anyone in the organization who hears about them. How can your organization do this? Here are a few approaches a team can take to ensure complaints are communicated to someone in the company who can do something about them.

Get your team together and ask them to brainstorm ways to get customers to voice their complaints. Make sure your employees know how to handle complaints, if any are expressed. And make certain customers know you want to help them. Let your team know that your purpose in hearing about complaints is not so you can attack a team member but rather so you can fix these issues.

A service provider, upon hearing a complaint from a customer, could tell that customer how beneficial feedback is to them – and that your company wants to offer the best service. Hence, you need to know when that doesn't happen. That way, you give customers a chance to speak up about anything making them less likely to become loyal customers.

The desire to reduce complaints results in the belief, "We never get complaints," which I have heard multiple times. David Powley, a former auditor for the ISO 9000 certification, says that when he hears that statement, he thinks the company probably would not know "how to recognize a customer complaint if it was staring them in the face." Like many other researchers, Powley states that an "absence of dissent" doesn't mean there were no complaints.

The client described above who forgot his financial folder for his appointment may blame himself for not remembering to bring it with him. That doesn't mean there isn't something the agency could do to help their clients remember to bring necessary documents with them when coming in for a financial consultation.

We all know how much effort it takes to get new clients. And you certainly don't want to risk losing them by not hearing about the complaints they are willing to discuss. Don't let it happen in your operation.

This topic is so important that I will return to address it in July — specifically, what can you do to get more feedback?

If you are reading my blogs each month, you'll find it!