

Tech-savvy customers vent consumer frustration

Complaining on Internet brings action via some new approaches

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Once upon a time, unhappy customers had little leverage against big companies and their poor customer-service procedures.

Then came the Internet — replete with sites for posting complaints about below-par products and service. But there's something that consumers should think about before posting their gripes on the Web: Is online complaining worth it?

Sometimes complaints entail long, unedited rants, leaving customers skeptical about their credibility, as well as about the personal vendettas that may have fueled them. Some consumer advocacy groups are unsure whether small complaints will even prompt large companies to overhaul their customer-service policies.

"I can't say how effective (online complaining) is," said Gary Larson, a spokesman for the Center for Digital Democracy, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group for Internet and democracy issues.

"Customer service is not improving."

Yet, two consumers recently got their customer service complaints noticed using the tools of the Internet. Vincent Ferrari of the Bronx and Brian Finkelstein of Washington, D.C., recorded their respective experiences with AOL and ComCast and posted the audio recordings and video on the Web. The postings spread like wildfire, and both companies took steps to make amends: Ferrari got his account canceled, as requested, and ComCast fired a technician who had been taped while snoozing.

On an even larger scale, Ferrari and Finkelstein's actions brought what they saw as the companies' poor customer-service procedures to the attention of millions — not just a handful of federal and state regulators. Experts say companies are noticing that power.

With all the avenues before them, consumers may want to consider which actions will bring optimal results: exposing complaints online for millions to read, or taking up the case with a traditional consumer-affairs agency that has power to effect change. Here's a look at those routes, as well as the good and bad of online complaining.

In addition to the AOL and ComCast complainers, other audio-visually savvy customers have tacked up their sad customer-service experiences on the Web. While a YouTube.com search for "customer service" reveals some amateur attempts at filmmaking, it also pulls up notes of others frustrated with customer service offered by companies such as Sony and Iberian Airlines. Thousands of users each day log on to YouTube, which allows them to view and share videos, so there's ample opportunity for bad publicity for targeted companies.

Personal blogs are another venue for venting customer-service frustration. Recent arrivals include professional consumer blogs such as Consumerist.com, which offers the potential for garnering a critical mass on a given consumer issue — and thus may pose a bigger challenge to big business.

Consumerist's mission is to expose "inhumane customer support," according to its Web site. It recently posted the AOL customer-service manual, allowing users to learn that AOL's customer-service representatives are advised to think of cancellation calls as sales leads.

Consumerist editor Ben Popken says AOL hasn't responded to the posting, but that's not why he posted it to begin with. He just wants to get the word out.

"It's like sharing an open forum," Popken said. "It's like people getting together over their backyard fences and saying, 'Did you hear about lettuce at the grocery? It's not good, you should go to farmer Joe's instead.'"

AOL declined to comment.

While these outlets are part of the new wave of airing customer-service complaints, consumers have been savvy about exposing problems on the Internet since the advent a few years ago of complaint Web sites such as RipOffReport.com, ConsumerAffairs.com and Complaints.com. On all three sites, consumers not only can rant about shoddy customer service but also unite against scams and broken promises. Each site offers different options to accomplish that.

Ed Magedson, editor of RipOffReport.com, started the site in 1998 and says he gets more than 800 reports daily. His site, based in Tempe, Ariz., never removes any of them from the Web site — even if a company rights the supposed wrong. But he gives the targeted company a chance to respond on his Web site.

"The company needs to either do right so consumers can come back and tell how (the company) did the right thing, or update the report with how the business didn't want to realize what they did wrong," he said.

ConsumerAffairs.com is run by former Associated Press journalist Jim Hood, who said the Santa Monica, Calif.-based site publishes not only some of the approximately 200 complaints it receives daily but also consumer-issues articles — sometimes based on the complaints — written by a staff of eight freelancers.

He's selective about which rants he publishes so the site will remain credible to other users who check it out.

"We try to clean them up," he said, "take out the expletives."

Matt Smith founded the Chicago-based Complaints.com in 2000 and receives about 100 complaints daily. He said the advantage of his site is that most of its filed complaints get ranked highly on search engines.

"It's a megaphone," Smith said. "A blog itself gets lost, but this is an effective way to get people to read (your complaint). It gets a lot of attention."

All of the sites said they provide information to traditional consumer representatives such as state attorneys general and lawyers formally prosecuting certain companies. The sites never file suit against companies themselves; they leave such actions to government offices, including the Federal Trade Commission, state attorneys general and consumer protection agencies.

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