Complaining Customers: Your Greatest Asset

Many businesses fear complaining customers. They worry about how to handle them and become concerned about the repercussions. Successfully handling customer complaints is part of doing business, and all staff should be trained in this core skill.



No matter how good your business is, it only takes a misunderstanding, a stressful day, a staff shortage, or a rush of customers for your normal good service to fall below par. And that's when you're likely to get a complaint.

Except you might not.

Many people don't like to complain directly. We prefer to avoid confrontation, so instead of complaining, we'll simply avoid the business that gave us poor service. You may never know why we haven't returned.

Qualtrics' 2025 Consumer Trends Report, drawing on nearly 24,000 consumers across 23 countries, found that fewer than a third give feedback directly to a company. When people

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did share their experiences, telling family or friends was the most common response. Silence, then, isn't necessarily a sign that everyone's happy.

A person who complains is giving you something the quietly disappearing customer doesn't: an opportunity to put things right.

That's a slightly different way of thinking about complaints

They may not be trying to help you improve. They may simply want the service they paid for, an explanation, or an apology. But their complaint can still provide useful information about your business.

If you resolve it in a way that leaves your customer happy, you have a chance to rebuild their trust. They may even become one of your best allies and refer others to you. Handle it badly, and you give them another reason to go elsewhere — and post a bad review.

Make it easy to tell you

Encourage honest feedback before a small irritation becomes a reason never to return.

How do you do this?

Start by paying attention to customers when they're in your business:

- Do they seem happy, frustrated, relaxed, rushed, or confused?
- Do they appear to be looking for something or waiting for help?
- How did the interaction go?
- Did they seem happy when they left, regardless of whether they bought anything?

Notice body language and tone of voice, but check your interpretation. Someone looking cross might be unhappy with your service. They might also have a headache. A friendly "How can I help you?" is more useful than deciding you know what they're thinking.

Afterwards, where appropriate, you could follow up by phone or email. Keep any questionnaire short and ask questions that invite an honest answer:

- What worked well for you?
- What could we have done better or differently?
- Was there anything you needed that we didn't provide?

In face to face interactions

"Was everything okay?" makes it very easy to say "Yes, thanks" and escape.

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If you're really brave and want serious feedback you can use to improve customer service, better questions might be: "How did we do today? Was there something we didn't do that would have made your visit even better?"

They need to be asked with genuine curiosity, an openness to receive whatever answers the questions provoke, and gratitude that the customer gave you direct feedback.

You might be surprised by the answers.

Listen, resolve, and follow through

When someone raises a problem, resist the urge to interrupt, defend yourself, or explain why it couldn't possibly have happened.

Listen. Ask questions to understand what went wrong. Thank them for telling you and apologise sincerely where you've fallen short.



If you're unsure what would resolve the problem, ask. You don't have to agree to every request, but you do need to explain clearly what you *can* do.

Then do what you've agreed. If fixing the problem will take time, tell them when they can expect an update. Don't make them chase you for the solution to something they've already had to complain about.

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When the complaint is online

Google reviews, Airbnb, and social media give customers a public place to share their experiences. Your response is public too, so think about what it tells everyone else reading it.

Google's guidance recommends responding promptly, keeping replies helpful and polite, protecting customers' private information, and taking complex discussions to phone or email.

Acknowledge the specific concern, apologise where appropriate, and offer a clear next step. For example:

"Thanks for letting us know about the wait, Alex. I'm sorry we didn't keep you updated. Please contact [name/contact details] so we can discuss what happened and put things right."

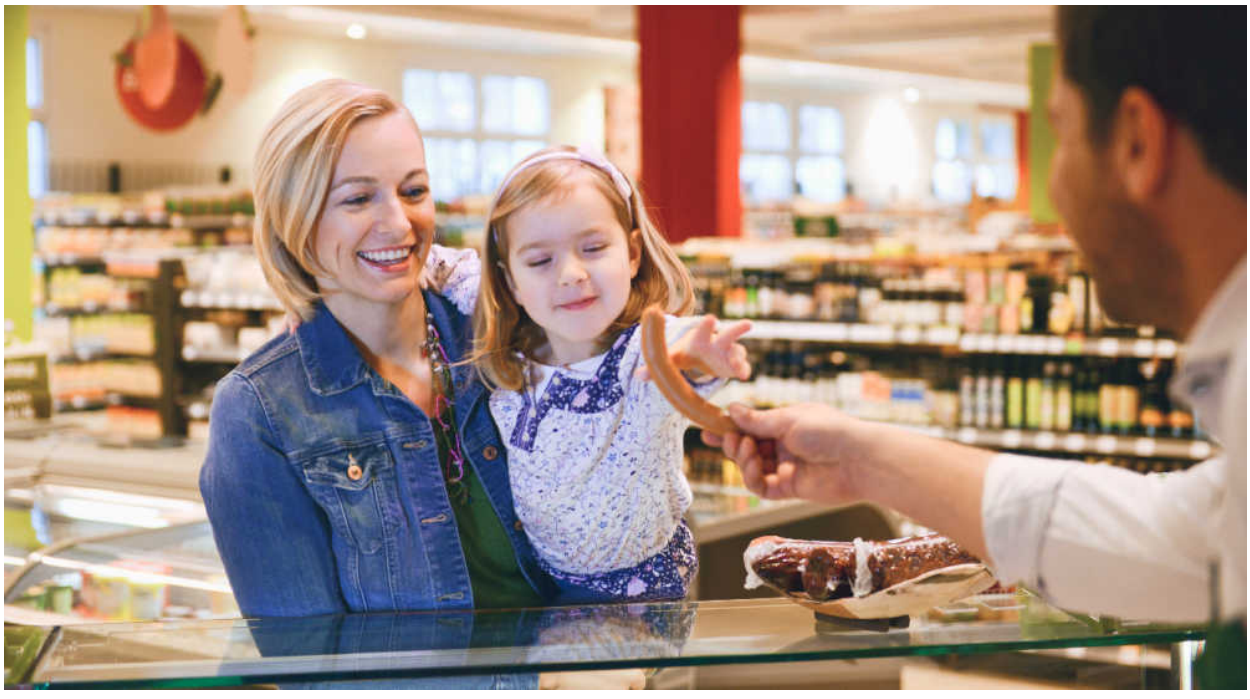
Then make sure that conversation actually happens.

If a review is inaccurate, calmly clarify the relevant facts without making personal attacks. And if you're furious, step away before typing. The internet doesn't need the first draft of your temper.

Fix the cause, too

Whatever customers tell you, thank them for their feedback and honesty. Then use the information.

Don't start by blaming your staff. Find out what caused the poor service. Were instructions unclear? Was someone trying to serve customers while answering the phone and unpacking a delivery? Did they have the authority to resolve the problem?



Train staff to notice when customers might be upset and address issues promptly and in a friendly way. Make sure your systems support great service rather than taking staff's time and energy away from customers.

Staff also need your support. Taking a complaint seriously doesn't mean accepting threats or personal abuse.

Look for recurring problems, make changes, and, where possible, let customers know what you've done. It shows that speaking up was worth the effort.

Remember, the customers you make feel special will become special customers.

About the author: Stephanie Philp is a Raglan-based Human Change Specialist and founder of Inside Your Mind Ltd. She helps individuals and organisations communicate more effectively, change unhelpful patterns, and make progress towards what matters to them.

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