

Complaints: Separating Myths from Reality

For almost three decades, I have been studying complaint handling as it is practiced around the world. I frequently hear that complaint handling (or claims as they are sometimes called) by service providers is highly dependent upon cultural and local differences. Of course, there are always variations, the field is actually quite consistent by and large. Here are four myths that I have found uniformly inaccurate concerning complaint handling. Yet, almost all these myths are believed around the world.

Myth # 1:

People naturally know how to handle complaints.
After all, they've been receiving them their entire lives.

Reality: Most people have to check their natural reactions when receiving complaints. At some level, a complaint is experienced as an attack. When attacked most of us feel inclined to defend, especially if the complaint is delivered in a blaming manner. This tendency to defend happens around the world. Effective complaint handling requires that service providers counter their habitual, natural, or cultural preferences. Most people have to get a considerable distance from their complaint handling to understand how their behavior may not be appropriate, even though it may feel right. When personnel who handle complaints hear themselves on tape with customers, they are frequently surprised that they sound so hostile and arrogant.

Almost no one intentionally mishandles complaints. The consequence of people not knowing how to "naturally" respond to complaints creates the additional problem of complaint handlers justifying their behavior to customers. After all, whatever their responses are, they feel "right."

This puts the complaint handler in the position of believing that when a complaint situation doesn't go right, the person complaining is responsible.

Most people have to get a considerable distance from their complaint handling to understand how their behavior may not be appropriate, even though it may feel right. When personnel who handle complaints hear themselves on tape with customers, they are frequently surprised that they sound so hostile and arrogant. There will always be some room for improvement. However, your quality will suffer when you fail to hear this dissatisfaction. It's not a good situation when your customers report huge numbers of complaints. That's clearly a sign that something is wrong. At the same time, it's a big mistake to conclude that you are doing a great job because you never hear complaints. We have to remember that most dissatisfied customers do not take the trouble to complain. They walk away and go to a competitor.



Myth # 2:

It's a good idea to set targets to reduce the number of complaints you receive.

Reality: Really bad idea! When you set targets to reduce complaints, your staff will help you by not reporting the bad news they hear. This happens everywhere I have worked around the globe. Setting targets to reduce complaints encourages Customer Service Representatives (CSR) to make sure your organization receives less customer feedback. CSRs will make it more difficult for customers to complain, or they will discard complaint evidence. Suppose, for example, a firm offers a bonus to local office managers who reduce the number of received complaints. It is common for staff to "help" ensure a good reputation for their general manager with the corporate offices by simply tearing up the negative feedback forms. All the general manager has to do to encourage this behavior is to say, "Well, we got another negative piece of feedback from one of our customers. They sure won't be happy about this at corporate." It is unlikely that the manager will ever again have to ask staff to report this type of problem.

Myth # 3:

If you give customers what they want, you have satisfied them.

Reality: No way! Giving customers what they want when they complain does not guarantee satisfaction — anywhere in the world. There is a huge emotional component to complaints. If this emotionality is not addressed, you can give customers everything they want, and they will still walk away upset. Good complaint handlers understand this and both fix problems and also address the psychological dimensions of complaining. For example, if a customer finds mistakes in a service you provide, they will undoubtedly complain and want the situation fixed immediately. They may also like a refund of some sort. Let's assume that — after many lengthy telephone calls, several strong e-mails and letters, threats, etc. — the customer receives a reduction in the monthly bill for the period of time the mistake was made. Although, in this situation, the customer ultimately got what they wanted, they are not likely to be pleased. They had to fight to get what they felt was rightfully theirs. Every time the customer deals with this company, they will be reminded of their unpleasant fight when something went wrong. They wanted rapid, polite, compassionate and error-free treatment. Yes, the mistake was remedied, but they didn't receive the emotional response that perhaps was as important to them.

Myth # 4:

Complaints signify that your company is not doing a quality job.

Reality: Companies inevitably create some dissatisfaction with their customers. Having zero defects is a useful target, not a realistic possibility. There will always be some room for improvement. However, your quality will suffer when you fail to hear this dissatisfaction.



Some organizations actually set up reward policies so that managers of branch operations who get the fewest complaints get monetary rewards. I've experienced this in hotels all over the world. If I walk up to the front desk and say, "I have a feedback form that I filled out and would like you to give it to your manager," I'm thanked for completing the feedback form, but when walking away, I have seen them tear up the form I just completed. I know what's going on in organizations like that.

The managers have announced with irritation that they are sick and tired of getting so many complaints, and their staff has learned not to pass along complaints to their managers. In these situations, it's quite likely that corporate offices have set up reward systems to grant bonuses to those managers whose complaints numbers are low.

A service provider upon completing a meeting with a customer, could tell that customer how very useful feedback is to them – and that your company wants to offer the best service, so you need to know when that doesn't happen. That way, you give the customer a chance to speak up about anything that might have happened that makes them less likely to be a strong and loyal customer. We all know how much effort it takes to get new clients. And we certainly don't want to run the risk of losing them by not listening to and fixing complaints they have. Don't let it happen in your operation.

