

Customer Complaints: Why Your Brand Can’t Survive Without Them

“You can’t complain on a Saturday.”

I paused, certain that I’d misunderstood. “Pardon?”

“Our Complaint Department is only open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Central time. You can call back and share your complaint during those hours.”

It was hard to believe that I was hearing this from a customer service rep of a major U.S.-based international airline – one which operates all over the world, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

“But, what if I *want* to complain on a Saturday?” I asked.

“You can write an email to our Complaint Department, and they will get back to you in writing within four days.”

As a frustrated customer, I wanted – and needed – immediate attention, but I was being told that I would have to wait to be helped.

This situation reminded me of just how dangerous it is for businesses and brands to ignore the needs and concerns of the very people who keep them afloat – their customers. As someone who travels a great deal, I could easily choose to buy my next ticket from a different airline. And my rejected airline would never even know why because they had made it so difficult for me to complain.

Use Complaints to Build Your Brand

One of the most overlooked ways to build your company’s brand is to encourage your customers to complain. It sounds counter-intuitive, but the best brands recognize they not only want, but *need* their customers to complain. It’s the #1 means of finding out how to make your services or products better - and that’s what will strengthen your brand equity in the marketplace and ultimately grow your business.

How well does *your* brand leverage complaints? Here are some tips for using complaints to your brand’s benefit:

1. **Make it as easy as possible for your customers to complain.** Think about all the possible ways your customers might want to complain... by phone? in a posted letter? via your website? via e-mail? Make sure you have all those possible complaint outlets available.

2. **Allow customers to complain around the clock.** If your customers use your products or services 24-7-365, then you should be prepared to receive complaints 24-7-365, too. Maybe you don't have a customer service rep available all day? Then, at a minimum, have a dedicated complaint voicemail system that assures customers they will be heard and that their problems will be addressed quickly. Then, make sure someone checks the complaint system regularly and lives up to that promise.
3. **Place an online complaint or ‘contact’ form on your website,** and make it easy for customers to find it in your navigation structure. If they have to search for how to complain, you've just created yet another complaint!
4. If you maintain a store or office where customers visit, **have pens and complaint forms readily available to fill out.**
5. **Make sure that designated employees are responsible for following up immediately** on all customer complaints. Don't make a customer wait for a response, and do everything you can to address the customer's concerns. If you go the extra mile, you'll most likely have a loyal customer for life.
6. **Train your staff to handle customer complaints properly** and, most importantly, in a way that is consistent with your company's brand values. Remind your staff that they represent the company's brand and that how they talk to customers – and address their concerns - is fundamental to success.
7. **Designate someone to track incoming complaints and watch for trends.** This is how you know what needs to change to take better care of your customers and avoid damaging your brand.

Turning a blind ear to customer complaints is an exercise in denial and won't get you anywhere when it comes to building a powerful brand. So, if you or your team are afraid of complaints, it's time for a mindset shift. Think of complaints as a gift that will help you better manage how your customers perceive, think, and feel about your brand.

After all, if customers don't complain *to* you, it's guaranteed that they will complain *about* you... to others! Case in point: I never did write or call the airline to complain, but here I am sharing my frustrations with you. Don't let that happen to your brand.

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With an MBA from Harvard Business School, Brenda's career has spanned more than two decades and has included developing mega brands for Procter & Gamble and Bristol-Myers Squibb across four continents and 50 countries. Now, as President of Brand Development Associates (BDA) International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, corporate and personal brand development.

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