



I'm Mad as Heck & Someone Better Listen

How to complain and get results

By Dana Kader Robb

In Virginia, a company called Ellen's Poison Pen writes letters on behalf of people who are unhappy with a service or product they've bought. In the past year and a half, Ellen has written over 2000 letters.

Obviously, there are plenty of us out here who are dissatisfied with a purchase at some point. We've plunked down our money and expect quality. When we don't get it, we want someone to listen to our complaints and to fix our problems – quickly and painlessly! Following are some tips to guide you closer to getting the results you want.

- Buy right – especially if you are making an expensive purchase. Do some research about a company's customer service reputation before you buy a car, computer, large appliance or other major purchase.
- Go back to the shop or call the customer service number as soon as you realize you have a problem.
- If you have the time, put your complaint in writing. That way, if the problem is not resolved, you have a paper trail.
- Be brief and to the point.
- Decide what outcome you desire. Do you want a replacement, your money back, tech support, or what? If it's a reasonable request, companies will almost always try to give you what – if you can put it into words.
- Sometimes we just want to be "heard." If that's what you're looking for, fine. But be clear about it from the beginning.
- Document all conversations with the date, time, person to whom you spoke and outcome.
- Make sure you know how to follow-up if a promised solution (ie. We'll take that amount off your next invoice) doesn't happen. Set a deadline.
- Keep original receipts and, in the case of electronics, all packaging.
- Don't call when you're angry or in a hurry. Customer service reps are not punching bags and, if you acknowledge that, they're much more likely to help you.
- Make sure you're talking to the correct person so you only have to explain the situation once.
- Are you the right person to make the call? If you're looking for tech support and you barely know how to turn on the computer, ask someone else in your family or office to make the call with you standing nearby.
- Be as specific as possible. "It makes a funny sound" is much less helpful than "the hard disk sounds like it's grinding, then stops completely".
- Have the details handy. These should include date of purchase, model and serial number and any action you have already taken.
- Expect success. Don't start by saying, "I know I'm a little guy and you don't care at all about me".
- The Better Business Bureau has a sample complaint letter available on its Web site. You can find it at www.bbb.org/helpdesk/letter.

When It Still Ain't Fixed

There lots of resources available if you still don't feel you are getting satisfaction. They include consumer protection organizations, environmental health departments, legal aid associations, ombudsmen, arbitrators, trade associations and elected officials. Check your yellow pages or library Ready Reference desk and put them to work for you.