

MAGAZINE SPRING 2014 / RESEARCH FEATURE

What Unhappy Customers Want

Companies have tried for decades to improve customer complaints — without notable success. A new approach is needed.

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Reading Time: 13 min

In 1976, the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs sponsored what many consider the first national survey of customer satisfaction in the United States, asking consumers what problems they had experienced with products and services during the past year and profiling the resulting complaining behavior of those customers.¹ That study found that the expectations of many customers were not being met. Products people wanted were frequently out of stock, quality was often shoddy, and repairs and customer support were often poor. In the nearly 40 years since the original study, companies of every size and shape have identified customer service as an area of tremendous importance for customer retention and branding. In fact, in the minds of many managers, the ability to ratchet up customer service has become an essential element of competitiveness.

Given the amount of attention companies have since paid to improving customer service, they might expect to have seen dramatic gains in the level of customer satisfaction. However, based on the 2013 National Customer Rage (hereafter, Customer Rage) survey,² which followed the basic methodology of the original U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs survey, complainant satisfaction is lower today than in 1976. Although companies have invested in technology, call centers and other

resources (such as staff training) to provide better customer service, many businesses are finding that being able to create satisfied and loyal customers is more difficult today. Hurdles include a daunting rise in customer expectations; challenges posed by the Internet, social media and online word of mouth; and poor execution of upgraded corporate complaint-handling policies.



When Apple customers have problems with products, employees working in stores' Genius Bars provide the kind of efficient, expert guidance that many customers like.

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