



## Complaints Management

### Introduction

How often do organisations make promises to customers, follow through on them, and keep doing so year after year consistently? Not nearly as often as most would hope, despite the commitment that so many organisations have made to gathering and using "customer insights", while too often, the data that companies look to for such insights do not help in making the operational decisions that are crucial for customers to get what they value, or companies have no idea how to begin analysing the data in order to make the necessary changes (McKinsey&Co, n.d.). Moreover, the parts of the organisation that are most responsible for turning promises into reality may be too rigid and isolated from customers to respond quickly to their changing circumstances. To no surprise, many of us have heard stories about operations teams that are in the dark about new marketing strategies, resulting in confusion in the field (McKinsey&Co, n.d.).

Even within the most established companies, not everything runs smoothly all the time. Ultimately, it is rather difficult to anticipate the desires and needs of every single customer. It could be that the great majority of the target group is in fact mostly satisfied with your current offering, yet nonetheless some have problems with your product or service (IONOS, 2019). There are also times when something simply goes wrong during manufacturing, provisioning, or delivery. The product that the customer receives is not quite like it's advertised, or the service is not provided as you had planned. Mistakes can happen, however, the fact that paying customers are not happy with their purchase or service is something that probably every business professional can understand and needs to plan for (IONOS, 2019).

Hence the necessity for establishing a well-functioning complaint management process which ensures good rapport with their client even after a mistake has been made and that keeps them from turning away from your company in anger or disappointment (IONOS, 2019).

In this paper, we will take a deeper look at what complaint management is, including a discussion about service failure as well as service recovery in South Africa, the value of complaints (the untapped potential is incredible!). We further provide you with some tips for handling customer complaints, as well as a sneak peek at our awesome, state-of-the-art closed-loop-recovery software.

## What is Complaint Management

The term complaint management describes the handling of customer complaints within a company. Criticism is supposed to be evaluated in a way that is systematic and orderly, and used to create a positive impact for both the organisation as well as the customer. It is also intended to resolve the issue that prompted the customer's criticism in the first place. The goal of complaint management is to address the customer's concern, while simultaneously strengthening customer loyalty, as well as improving quality assurance (IONOS, 2019).

Just about every company receives complaints from customers – no one is completely immune to it. As a company gets larger, the number of critics usually grows as well. Eventually the number of complaints becomes so overwhelming and the company structure so complex, that one must introduce a complaint management process and a designated, upskilled team (IONOS, 2019).

This is because chaos tends to rule without a well-thought-out system, and this can have a significant impact on the success of your company (IONOS, 2019). An unsatisfied customer who doesn't have their feedback taken into consideration will probably no longer trust your offering and will also tell others about how frustrated they are, which is certainly something that we all want to avoid. In the past, it was perhaps only a few friends and family members who were likely to be influenced by a negative report. However, thanks to the internet and instant communication, complaints often reach countless readers.

### Customer Complaint Behaviour

Studies (Singh, 1988) suggests that customer complaint behaviour is described as a set of multiple responses that is prompted by perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase or service 'episode' (Walters, 2010). Complaining is distinguished from ordinary criticism in the sense that it articulates the source of dissatisfaction; it is therefore not simply a comment on what has occurred but rather a feeling towards what triggered the occurrence (or the dissatisfaction), and further leads to subjective judgement on the part of the customer (Walters, 2010).

Crie (2003) suggests that customer complaint behaviour's final manifestation does not directly depend on its initiating factors, but rather on the customer's subjective evaluation of the situation over time, as well as the way in which the complaint is handled; consequently, customer complaint behaviour should be viewed as a process or a journey in itself. This process commences when the customer has evaluated a 'consumption episode' (that is the process of making a purchase which has resulted in dissatisfaction) and the process ends when the customer has completed all behavioural and non-behavioural responses – which include taking public action, private action or no action (Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995; Walters, 2010).

### Service failure

Service failure research proposes that customer dissatisfaction is the primary consequence of service or product failures, which provides the motivation for subsequent customer complaint behaviour (Reynolds & Harris, 2005). Maxham (2001) defines a service failure from a customer's perspective as any real or perceived service-related problem that occurs during the customer's encounter with an

organisation. Patterson, Cowley and Prasongsukarn (2006) propound that a failed service encounter refers to an exchange where a customer perceives a loss due to a failure on the part of the service provider. Lewis and Spyropoulos (2001) conclude that if customers perceive a service failure regarding any dimensions of service quality, their service expectations have not been met (Walters, 2010).

However, although service failure is inevitable, the manner in which to deal with the dissatisfied client makes all the difference and could save you from losing a customer entirely.

## **Service Recovery**

When customer expectations are not met because of a service failure, another set of customer expectations become active, namely service recovery expectations (Lewis & Spyropoulos, 2001; Walters, 2010). Service recovery accordingly involves those actions that organisations take with a view to respond to service failures, with the ultimate purpose of restoring the customer to a state of satisfaction by attempting to rectify and recover those elements of the service delivery system which have failed (Lorenzoni & Lewis, 2004; Lewis & Spyropoulos, 2001). Boshoff (2009) suggests that a service recovery system must not only strive to correct problems as they occur, but must continuously monitor the entire service delivery system, in order to efficiently identify and prevent any problems before they take place.

Due to the growth of Internet, online service recovery has become more popular than ever before. Thus, it is important to recognise the differences between online and offline customers' expectations (Ollari, 2017). Research (Ollari, 2017) suggests that complaining online is highly preferred over complaining offline and at the same time those who complain online have higher expectations towards service recovery. The biggest difference between online and offline customers is the expectations towards the speed with which the company responds, since online customers are expecting more swift responses (1-2 days) in comparison to offline customers (Ollari, 2017).

## **Complaint Management in South Africa**

A salient characteristic of the pre-1994 South Africa is that people were not encouraged to complain about the services they received. This applied generally throughout the pre-1994 South African society, but if the non-designated groups were discouraged from voicing their dissatisfaction, people from the designated groups were positively restrained from voicing their opinions (SAHRC, 2018). All of this changed radically with the advent of the country's first democratically elected government and the promulgation of the South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights in 1996 (SAHRC, 2018). Freedom of thought and speech are enshrined in our Constitution, but not only does every South African have the right to say what they think, they are positively encouraged to complain when they do not receive the treatment and services they are entitled to (SAHRC, 2018).

Since 1996 further legislation has been enacted to protect our right to free speech and our right to complain and have compensation if our rights are compromised in any way. This is especially applicable to the Public Service, however, it is sufficient to note that South African citizens do not only have the right, but are expected to complain, if they are unhappy with the services they receive, specifically at the hands

of government officials. Furthermore, if a complaint about public service delivery is lodged, the person lodging the complaint has the right to a prompt, informative and helpful response. If it is found that the person has indeed been wronged or if, upon investigation, the complaint is upheld, the person has the right to redress and possibly compensation if he or she has suffered any material damage (SAHRC, 2018)

The National Consumer Commission (NCC) is the primary regulator of consumer-business interaction in South Africa and was created by government under the sponsorships of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), to ensure economic welfare of consumers (THENCC, 2020). As we know, consumers play a vital role in the growth of the economy and thus contribute to the national fiscus and the development of the country- this has become more apparent in 2020 as we face a global pandemic which has crippled the economy of many nations across the globe, ours included.

The NCC's mere existence in terms of the Consumer Protection Act, Act 68 of 2008 which it administers, is to promote a fair, accessible and sustainable marketplace for consumer products and services, establish norms and standards relating to consumer protection, to provide for improved standards of consumer information, prohibit unfair marketing and business practices, promote responsible consumer behaviour, and to promote a consistent legislative and enforcement framework relating to consumer transactions and agreements (THENCC, 2020).

What this simply means is that, the NCC registers and assesses complaints, investigates alleged misconduct by businesses, refers individual complaints to Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) agencies (that is, Provincial Consumer Affairs Authorities and relevant ombudsman schemes) for resolution, and represent consumers in the Consumer Tribunal amongst other things(THENCC, 2020).

The Consumer Protection Act recognises eight fundamental consumer rights, in line with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, and United Nations Guidelines on Consumer Protection, which every consumer of goods and services is entitled to, regardless of the monetary value of a transaction or the significance of the commodity a consumer buys, even if it's just a loaf of bread for daily use (THENCC, 2020). Consumers have rights, any infringement of these rights is an act of non-compliance with the provisions of the Consumer Protection Act.

These rights in terms of the Consumer Protection Act, Act 68 of 2008 are (THENCC, 2020):

1. The right to equality
2. The right to privacy
3. The right to choose
4. The right to disclosure of information
5. The right to fair and responsible marketing
6. The right to a fair and honest dealing
7. The right to fair, just and reasonable terms and conditions; and
8. The right to safe and good quality goods

A consumer may approach the NCC for guidance or assistance with a dispute that cannot be amicably resolved. In the interests of getting quick and cost-free redress, it is advisable to first raise a complaint with the business or provider of goods and services. The NCC provides its services free of charge to all consumers (THENCC, 2020).

# Customer Management Complaint Process: What Are the Procedures?

## Goals

Research (IONOS, 2019) suggests that the complete complaint management process is conducive to achieving two goals:

- **Customer satisfaction:** Complaint management is supposed to reduce customer dissatisfaction and ideally even strengthen customer loyalty.
- **Quality assurance:** Through complaint management, customer feedback reaches the right departments and contributes to the improvement of the product or service.

## Tasks

The goals mentioned above influence the tasks required, and as a result the complaint management procedures as well. In accordance with the **customer satisfaction** and **quality assurance** goals, there are several tasks which contribute to a positive customer rapport.

- **Simplify the complaints procedure and channels:** This is so that unsatisfied customers turn to you first instead of venting their dissatisfaction on social networks. You should offer the opportunity for feedback in the simplest way possible.
- **Ensure that the initial contact is positive:** The customer is supposed to feel as though they are in good hands when they submit their complaint. To achieve this, specially trained personnel *must* accept the criticism and make the unsatisfied customer feel that their opinion is important.
- **Clearly design the process:** It must be clear which feedback will be forwarded to which departments. This is why the task of complaint management is to create structures and clarify responsibilities.
- **Carry out direct actions:** Many responses, if anything, concern long-term quality assurance. However, one should also initiate some actions immediately and directly after contact with the customer. Whether a price discount or product exchange is appropriate depends on the individual case. However, what the different options are (if any) should already be determined beforehand and those employees dealing with complaints should be empowered to assist customers accordingly.

On the other hand, a submitted complaint could also have a long-term effect on the company's processes, as it is only in this way that performance quality can be improved sustainably.

- **Analyse feedback:** Customer complaints do not follow any standardised form. For this reason, all input must be evaluated with respect to content and the customer's intention. This is in order to be able to recognise patterns, set priorities, and implement measures.
- **Audit management:** Even complaint management itself must be audited regularly so that no negative procedures creep in. Furthermore, audits can unveil potential ways for you to improve processes.
- **Issue reports:** Reports based on audits provide decision-makers with important indicators. These can form the basis for initiating changes.

- **Use of collected information:** Conclusions can often be drawn from the data collected by complaint management. Information acquired by complaint management often provides points of reference for quality assurance and can later contribute to improvements in production and service performance, thus improving the organisation's overall performance.

## Framework Conditions

So that complaint management tasks can be successfully mastered, certain framework conditions must be satisfied (IONOS, 2019). Firstly, it requires an organisational structure, which further motivates why complaint management must be a fixed component within the company and also recognised as an important factor by company executives. In addition, it is worth clarifying the points at which there are points of intersection with other business divisions.

Second, it is worth investing in the right personnel and to train them as is appropriate. This relates especially to employees who engage directly with customers (IONOS, 2019). Employees must be skilled in diplomacy and de-escalation, and also must be able to deal with stressful situations, as not all customers are constructive in their criticism (IONOS, 2019).

Finally, a functioning infrastructure is also among the framework conditions (IONOS, 2019). Software and hardware should enable employees to shape both contact with customers as well as internal organisation in the best possible way.

## Procedures

In the complaint management process, a complaint passes through various stations. In order for the the customer can submit a complaint in the first place, your company should set up simple options for providing such feedback. This can be a hotline, a chat, a review page on your website, or an email address. Companies should always explicitly indicate such options. In this way, customers are encouraged to give feedback (IONOS, 2019).

After this, the complaint is processed. Here, friendliness and understanding on the part of the trained employee play a major role. Ensuring that your customers also learn what actions will be taken once their criticism have been addressed also plays a key part in dealing with complaints and communicating effectively with customers (IONOS, 2019).

The next step is to *handle* the customer's complaint. This also includes forwarding it to the appropriate department. Knowing that their feedback was accepted with appreciation and will lead to a change is already enough for many customers (IONOS, 2019). Others, however, require further action in order to be satisfied. For this, your support employees must have the appropriate resources available. In this step the employee thus responds directly to the customer and offers a discount, product exchange, repairs or some other perk which is intended to compensate for the dissatisfaction experienced by the customer. It also feeds into the service recovery paradox.

## The Value of Customer Complaints

Learning the value of customer complaints is an important step in taking your company to the next level and improving customer experience. But, if you know how to handle complaints effectively, they can be turned into constructive opportunities for your team and your company to grow.

The value of customer complaints is tenfold (Kaufman, 2017):

### **1. Identify vital areas for service improvement.**

Customer complaints highlight key areas where your product needs work, your systems need updating or your service is flagging. They can also point to employees who need extra training, a refresher course, or closer supervision. You are only as strong as your weakest employee! Consistency can be monitored through customer complaints. By observing where complaints are being focused, service levels across shifts, departments, locations, and teams can be clearly spotted and addressed.

### **2. Identify needed improvement in policies and procedures.**

The value of customer complaints becomes very clear when you start seeing areas that need improvement all the way down to your internal policies procedures. Your company might be operating with policies and procedures that are inconvenient for your team or your customers. Or they may be unclear or simply unnecessary. Customer complaints can assist in identifying these instances.

### **3. Improve customer communication.**

Simply, customer complaints open opportunities for you and your team to have clear and honest discussions with your customers. These conversations can help customers feel like truly valued and cared for. Also, complaints from customers can point out information that is lacking, erroneous or out of date.

### **4. Keep senior management informed.**

Often, customer complaints can shoot straight to the top, depending on how much of the company is affected. In this way, leaders and senior management can quickly learn about service issues that are important to your customers and your team.

While it's not ideal for senior management to be involved in customer complaints, it never hurts to have them occasionally involved in the day-to-day workings of the company. This allows a glimpse at what's happening "on the ground" and grants them the opportunity to communicate with team members they might not normally have access to.

### **5. Improve your service education.**

Customer complaints can give you valuable insight into your service education programs and how to improve them as well as address any gaps which may be highlighted. Complaints can be used as training models and content to educate your future employees as well as provide a 'refresher course' for existing employees.

### **6. Fuel for an uplifting service culture.**

If treated properly, customer complaints can be leveraged as catalysts for triggering new corporate action and positive change within the company and its systems.

A more cohesive experience can be attained when everyone can understand what your customers experience. Through the sharing of customer complaints throughout your organisation, everyone involved can benefit from the knowledge of what your

customers are expecting. New problems and hurdles to overcome keep our humility high and employees on their toes. Customer complaints prevent complacency. Through the act of logging and frequently reviewing customer complaints your organisation can improve focus on its priorities, service and budget.

### **7. Find new business opportunities.**

The things customers complain about may present new business opportunities for increasing revenue, reducing operational costs, solving problems and increasing value.

### **8. Obtain Competitive Insights**

Any opportunity to delve into what the competition is doing is beneficial. Customer comments and complaints along the lines of "company ABC does this better," means you can explore *how* they do it better—a *huge* growth opportunity. Customer complaints can provide you with valuable competitive insight, letting you know what others are doing that you are not (yet).

### **9. Better understand your customers.**

What a great opportunity to get to know your customers! When customers complain, they are letting you know loud and clear what their values are, and that's a huge edge to have in a competitive market. Complaints let you learn which customers are willing to speak up. You can use this knowledge to invite them to participate in customer focus groups, surveys, panels, beta-tests, on-site visits and other research activities.

### **10. Build Customer Loyalty**

A true test of someone's character is how they respond when challenged. This is true for businesses as well! Customer complaints are an opportunity to shine. How you respond to customer complaints shows your true colours. The customers who complain really care. Most upset customers simply walk away, never to be seen again. They complain about you to their friends, colleagues, acquaintances and family members, but they never let the most important person know they're dissatisfied—you. Those who do complain, however, are giving you a chance to fix the problem and prove yourself! Even if they don't know it themselves, a complaining customer wants you to succeed. If you can build back their trust you will have a customer for life.

## **Tips for Handling Customer Complaints**

Solving some customer complaints may ratify a change in the way that you do business. Studies (YEC, 2017) suggest that handling a customer complaint positively takes listening and understanding of the facts. Fast resolutions are expected, and a follow-up to ensure the customer is properly satisfied can turn a bad situation into one that was handled with great care and attention, and potentially recovering what may have been a lost client:

Here's a few simple points to keep in mind (Freifield, 2013):

- **Stay calm.** When a customer presents you with a complaint, keep in mind that the issue is not personal; he or she is not attacking you directly but rather the situation at hand. "Winning" the confrontation

accomplishes nothing. A person who remains in control of his or her emotions deals from a position of strength. While it is perfectly natural to get defensive when attacked, choose to be professional and keep your cool.

- **Listen well.** Allow the irate customer to blow off some steam. Respond with phrases such as, “Hmm,” “I see,” and “Tell me more.” Do not interrupt. As the customer vents and sees you are not reacting, he or she will begin to calm down. The customer needs to get into a calm frame of mind before he or she can hear your solution—or anything you say, for that matter.
- **Acknowledge the problem.** Let the customer know you hear what he or she is saying. If you or your company made a mistake, admit it. If you did not make a mistake and it is a misunderstanding, simply explain it to the customer: “I can see how that would be incredibly frustrating for you.”- You are not necessarily agreeing with what the customer is saying but respecting how he or she perceives and feels about the situation. An excellent phrase for opening up this particular conversation would be, “So, if I understand you correctly...” After the customer responds, follow up with, “So, if I understand you correctly, we were to resolve the problem by noon today. I can see how that must be frustrating for you.” Then be quiet. Usually, the customer will respond with “That’s right” or “Exactly.” By repeating to the customer what you think you heard, you lower his or her defences, and win the right to be heard.
- **Get the facts.** After listening, take the initiative in the conversation. Now that the customer has calmed down and feels you have heard his or her side, begin asking questions. Be careful not to overuse scripted responses, but rather use this as an opportunity to start a genuine conversation, building a trusting relationship with your customer. To help you understand the situation, get as many details as possible.
- **Offer a solution.** This happens only after you have sufficient details. One thing to keep in mind: Know what you can and cannot do within your company’s guidelines. Making a promise you cannot commit to will only set you back. Remember, when offering a solution, be courteous and respectful. Let the customer know you are willing to take ownership of the issue, even if it was out of your control. Take charge of the situation and let the customer know what you are going to do to solve the problem.
- A quick follow-up call a few days later to make sure everything has been sorted to their satisfaction is icing on the cake. Even a small gesture of apology can turn this interaction from disaster to
- excellent.
- When you resolve customer complaints successfully, you will better understand their needs, retain them as loyal customers, and enhance your business.

## Handling Customer Complaints During a Crisis

With virtually every facet of life being impacted by COVID-19, the way that you communicate with your customers are likely to have changed as well.

Studies have found that the following five key strategies help companies weather crises and preserve their bonds with consumers (Waldron & Wetherbe, 2020):

- **Humanise** your company
- **Educate** about change
- **Assure** stability
- **Revolutionize** offerings
- **Tackle** the future

These strategies are part of what is called the **HEART** framework of sustained crisis communication (Waldron & Wetherbe, 2020).

This is how it works (Waldron & Wetherbe, 2020):

### **Humanise Your Company.**

Let consumers know that your company understands the dire social circumstances at play and cares about more than simply reaping profit during this difficult time. Empathise with those affected by Covid-19 and spell out the steps you are taking to help customers, employees, and other stakeholders. Your company's social media sites and customer mailing lists are ideal vehicles for doing this. In communicating to your customer about what you can offer them, keep your message brief and classy while managing their expectations. Although consumers certainly care about the "softer side" of your business, don't overplay it. Ultimately customers will care most about the value you create for them. Also, expressing too much empathy could come across as insincere and blend into the soundscape of other companies saying the same things.

### **Educate consumers about how to interact with your company.**

Tell them about all changes to your operation if necessary, including new hours, facility closures, staff reductions, customer service availability, and ordering options, among others. While you can reference the emergency government regulations that necessitated these changes, it's far better if you are viewed as being proactive and motivated by your customers' best interests.

### **Assure consumers the company's values will continue.**

Elaborate how, despite the upheaval in how you operate, you will continue to provide the things they have come to know and love — the defining reasons they support your business instead of others. If consumers value the impeccable quality of your wares or the thoughtful nature of your customer service, tell them how you will maintain those value propositions.

### **Revolutionise what consumers value about your business.**

Tell your existing customers how you are serving them in new ways. Reach out to potential customers by offering new products or services that solve a new problem.

Companies that take these measures, and let consumers know about them, will inject hope into their heartache, as they see how companies are developing ways to make their lives better. Doing so offers the added benefit of further humanizing a company.

### **Tackle the future.**

Establish a timeline for when you will re-evaluate the changes to your company's operations. While you must comply with any government-imposed limits, do more if you can afford it. Show customers that you are willing to go beyond what you need to do for their benefit, particularly if your company can handle the financial burden. Your company can demonstrate going "above and beyond" in various ways, all of which point to silver linings of the pandemic experience. Highlight what your company has learned from the pandemic experience, as well as how these learnings might improve the way your company operates after the pandemic ends. That is, signal that your company will come out stronger on the other side of the storm. The temporary improvements that satisfy customers now may become permanent improvements to your company's business model in the future. This will inspire confidence.

## **Complaint Recovery Software**

It is often useful to make use of a software that allows you to efficiently manage and track complaints. At Genex Insights, Resolve is our **closed loop recovery software**. Our platform includes advanced case management functionality. It routes cases to the appropriate members of your team and escalates matters to ensure consistent, timely responses to customer queries and complaints. Even more importantly, detailed case information is linked directly to the analytics service. We're able to use this information to track, identify and eliminate pain points in the overall customer experience.

It is a case management system which gives service recovery managers access to low ratings, escalations and complaints so that participants can be contacted and assisted.

Some of the capabilities include:

- Sends **real time email alerts**; notifying service recovery personnel that a client is dissatisfied
- Provides a **case management workflow software** for contacting the client
- Provides a **platform for reporting**

Many organisations are getting ahead of their complaint management processes by using this superior technology, ensuring that they deliver on their promises.

However, you choose to manage complaints – make sure that the process allows you to clearly track, identify and eliminate your customer concerns.

## **Conclusions**

Customer complaints come in all forms and happen to every business. Dealing with a customer complaint takes a great deal of tact and ignoring it can wreak havoc on your entire business reputation. When a customer has a particularly sensitive complaint about your business products and services, how you deal with it can mean the difference between good customer service and a poor attempt at helping. When

possible, the customer should be able to understand what sort of consequences their criticism will have. Sometimes, however, ongoing communication regarding a specific matter is not economically feasible. For this reason, business professionals must weigh what type of response still makes sense at that point and what would exceed a reasonable response.

Good complaint management means wanting to really help your customer and recognising the feedback as an opportunity to improve your company. If you manage to also make this noticeable in your communications with your customer base, unsatisfied customers will become regular customers. As such, service recovery is an important function for companies to maintain satisfied customers. In order to have successful service recovery, customers' expectations should be recognised and met. Furthermore, a well-organised complaint management process reduces the risk of delivery or manufacturing errors (IONOS, 2019). This is because customer feedback only must reach the right department for the product to be made even better in the future.

Recovery is fundamental to service excellence and should therefore be regarded as an integral part of a service company's strategy. With the right customer-centric attitude and an awareness of what people need right now, companies can emerge from the current Covid-19 crisis having strengthened their relationships with customers (Waldron & Wetherbe, 2020). It will cultivate long-lasting goodwill with customers and help ensure they will stay with you in the future. In service businesses, the adage must be revised: To err is human; to recover, divine (Hart, Heskett, & Sesser, Jr. 1990).

Genex Insights is here to help you turn those complaints into wins!

**Prepared by**  
Genex Insights  
[www.genex.co.za](http://www.genex.co.za)

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