



Handling Complaints

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Below is a procedure for handling complaints in small or large, manufacturing or service, private or public sector organisation.

It is designed to enable a consistent organisation-wide approach to complaints which ensures that they are dealt with effectively to the advantage of both the customer and the organisation.

Definition

A complaint is an expression of lack of satisfaction with any product or service, whether orally or in writing, from an internal or external customer.

Advantages

A complaints procedure:

- provides a clear approach when a complaint occurs
- engenders understanding and confidence on how to tackle complaints
- helps to remove personal 'guilt' feelings when receiving a complaint
- leads to a recognition of complaints as valuable feedback, not criticisms
- can produce records for analysing possible service improvements.

10 point checklist

1. Establish a common approach to handling complaints

This must have widespread approval from the top to the bottom of the organisation, including staff who do not come into direct contact with customers. Ensure that everyone is thinking about customers in the same way. This should be embedded into the organisation's culture and is primarily the responsibility of senior management.

Remember that when customers complain, they like to be:

- aware of who is dealing with the complaint
- listened to and believed
- treated fairly and efficiently
- kept informed of progress
- compensated if it is appropriate.

2. Draw up a standard complaints form

This is a valuable tool which should include the following sub-headings:

Receipt details

- date received
- received by

- department/division

Customer details

- name, address, identifier
- telephone / fax / e-mail

Complaint details

Action (to be) taken

- date completed
- sign-off
- line superior

3. Ensure complaints are assessed correctly

On receipt of a complaint, the recipient should look on it as a second chance to satisfy the customer. Staff should:

- be courteous and empathise with the customer
- ensure that all the details are obtained and recorded on the standard complaints form
- be satisfied that the information is factual
- not admit liability or fault at this stage.

Subject to appropriate information seeking and establishment of the facts, the recipient, in conjunction with his or her line manager if necessary, should decide whether it is a major or minor complaint.

Minor complaints may result from misinterpretation, misunderstanding, detail errors, or straightforward carelessness. Major complaints may involve breach of the criminal law or have health and safety or financial implications.

4. Establish ownership and responsibility

Staff should be empowered to take appropriate action if the complaint is clearly justified, falls within their jurisdiction, and can be rectified immediately. If the complaint cannot be resolved by the recipient, details of the customer and complaint should be noted on the form and passed quickly to the relevant area or level of responsibility. The customer should be told who is dealing with the complaint - nothing is more frustrating than dealing with a faceless organisation, or being passed from one person to another - and that a reply will be given as soon as possible, and within a specified time limit.

5. Establish escalation procedures

In the case of major complaints, the manager should decide on the appropriate action and this may involve:

- consulting a higher authority
- the production of a detailed report on the events
- contact with the organisation's solicitor
- contact with the police.

6. Emphasise customer contact for complaint resolution

If the level of seriousness has been properly understood, and the establishment of the facts correctly carried out, then appropriate action should become apparent. Problem resolution is not a time for negotiation or bartering with a customer who has a genuine grievance and who should perhaps be compensated generously. If there is any delay in resolving complaints, the customer should be contacted at regular, agreed intervals so that a progress update can be given.

7. Ensure complaints forms are signed off

When the problem has been resolved to the satisfaction of the customer, the recipient or superior should sign off the complaints form for subsequent analysis of any complaints trends.

It could be that there is no satisfactory solution, that the customer may require something "unreasonable" or "beyond" the remit of the organisation to deliver. If this occurs, it may be appropriate to:

- inform the customer that expectations exceeded capabilities
- re-affirm which steps can be taken
- and to state that a report will be passed on to senior management.

8. Decide internal corrective action

Having dealt with the complaint, decide whether any system, equipment or personnel-related improvement needs tackling. Deal with internal process improvements or training requirements as soon as possible after the complaint has occurred.

9. Build in customer satisfaction checks

After an appropriate interval, say two weeks, get back in touch with the customer to confirm that the complaint was satisfactorily resolved - and to check that the organisation still has a customer.

10. Analyse complaints periodically

All complaints forms should be returned to a simple, central address where a manager should have responsibility for monitoring the level and nature of complaints on a regular basis. The results of this analysis, and details of any corrective action, should be reported to senior management on a regular basis.

Dos and don'ts for handling complaints

Do

- Make customer service part of the corporate culture.
- Empower staff to deal with complaints.
- Keep in contact with the customer to ensure that the complaint is dealt with to their satisfaction.
- Analyse the pattern of complaints and take action to make improvements. Treat complaints positively.

Courtesy, speed of response and a personal touch are essential. A complaining customer who gets all three will usually emerge a more satisfied customer than before he/she had any complaints. And he/she will tell others in turn.

Don't allow staff to:

- blame the computer
- say it's not their department
- take the complaint personally or defensively
- allocate blame
- use paperwork to block a fast response to complaints.

Offhandedness, slowness and impersonality are likely to lose you not only that customer but many others as well - bad news spreads.