

Complaints

a guide for businesses

June 2003

Any complaints handling policy you adopt needs to acknowledge that:

- your customers have the right to complain about goods and/or services purchased, and to have the complaint dealt with;
- complaints can provide you with feedback about goods and/or services being offered; and
- receiving a complaint gives you the opportunity to assess the impact on the market of certain goods and/or services.

Paying proper attention to customer complaints is an essential part of a well managed business operation. In fact, complaints can improve your efficiency and profitability.

Essential features of a complaint handling system

The following five-point framework can be used to develop a system for responding to complaints from your customers.

1. Commitment

There should be a commitment at all levels of your business to a complaint resolution system that is efficient, fair and includes:

- acknowledging that your customers have a right to complain;
- openly seeking feedback from your customers; and
- having a written policy about handling complaints which is readily available to your customers.

2. Fairness

Complaint handling should be fair to all parties, and must allow everyone's views to be heard and taken into account in a balanced way.

3. Effectiveness

Adequate resources should be made available to handle complaints efficiently and effectively.

Complaints received should be dealt with quickly and courteously.

Those involved in responding to complaints should have the authority and ability to decide remedies and to put them into effect.

Consumer Protection Division

Forrest Centre, 219 St Georges Terrace
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Facsimile: 9282 0850 Email: consumer@docep.wa.gov.au
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Department of Consumer
and Employment Protection
Government of Western Australia

4. Accessibility

Your complaint handling system should be accessible to all customers, and help them lodge their complaints.

Information about how to make a complaint should be readily available and simple to understand. Consider making it available in several different languages if you regularly deal with non-English speaking people.

It should not cost your customer anything to make a complaint.

5. Accountability

You should record the complaints received and the outcomes achieved.

Recurring and systemic problems which become known through your complaint handling system should be identified and rectified.

Review the operation of your complaint handling system regularly to make sure that effective outcomes are achieved for customers and traders.

Make sure there is appropriate reporting of the findings of reviews into the operations of the complaint handling systems.

How to handle verbal and written complaints

Once you have set up a complaint handling system, the following procedure may help you respond to a customer who is making a complaint about goods and/or services received:

- identify yourself, listen (or read carefully), take details, find out what the complainant wants;
- confirm with the customer the details you have taken;
- empathise with the customer and be courteous;
- avoid laying blame or being defensive;
- access the responsibility of your business in respect of the customers complaint;
- if a resolution to the complaint is not immediately possible, make a commitment to do something realistic and achievable about resolving it, even if someone else will eventually handle the complaint;

- avoid creating false expectations;
- ask if the complainant is satisfied with the action taken or proposed in respect of the process and the redress. If the complainant is not satisfied, give advice about available alternatives;
- provide an acknowledgement of contacts by letter or phone as appropriate, taking care to record your responses;
- identify problems, if necessary, within your business, and address those that require remedy; and
- follow up, monitor and provide feedback to each party involved in the complaint.

If the complaint can't be resolved

The suggestions so far focus on a system for handling dissatisfaction expressed to a trader by a customer.

It is preferable to try to settle the problem with the complainant early rather than allow it to escalate into a larger and more difficult dispute.

If the complaint can't be resolved within the five-point framework described above, it may be necessary to refer the matter to other, sometimes more formal, procedures for dispute resolution.

Dispute resolution aims to deal with problems which cannot be resolved within a complaint handling system.

Need more help

The Department of Consumer and Employment Protection can provide further information about dispute resolution, to both businesses and customers. Simply ring the Consumer Protection Call Centre on 1300 30 40 54 (cost of a local call statewide).

This publication is available on request in other formats to assist people with special needs.

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