

# The Art of Complaining

\* V. Michelle Parry

If you think about it, the opposite of complaining is to express appreciation. When one receives good service or enjoys a product, one often gives a compliment; however, when one receives a poor quality product or bad service, slow service or no service, one is inclined to complain. In simplest terms, a complaint is a statement about unmet expectations, while a compliment is confirmation of expectations having been met or exceeded.

Consumer research firms tell businesses that it is in their interest to right wrongs done to customers because it is up to six times more costly to gain a new customer than it is to maintain a relationship with an existing one. However, the research also shows that about 96% of people do not complain to the business about minor problems, instead complaining to family and friends, or they may simply take future business elsewhere. Further, only one out of seven people who do complain to the business will suggest a solution, making it much more difficult for resolution to be achieved.

Take for example, the following:

A few weeks ago, I was having a fabulous dinner out with friends. We were enjoying each others company, the atmosphere and the leisurely pace of the meal. However, at a nearby table, the situation was apparently different and eventually the gentleman barked loudly, "Are we ever going to get our food!" in the general direction of the wait staff. The gentleman was obviously exasperated - his companion and the staff were obviously embarrassed - others in the room chuckled, were startled or ignored him.

As best I could tell, the gentleman did not get anything for his trouble - not even an extra bread basket.

If his goal was to get satisfaction, choosing to communicate his frustration in the way that he did was not the way to provoke a positive response. Where did he go wrong? First, he was not addressing any one particular person. Second, he was unpleasant. Third, other than wanting his food, he did not say what the staff could do to make the situation better.

*V. Michelle Parry is the owner of Wise Resolution, LLC. She has been licensed to practice law in Alabama since 2000 where she was also a law professor and a mediator. Her Arizona bar admission is currently pending. She is available to mediate or arbitrate cases in either Birmingham or Mesa.*

How could he have stated his complaint differently?

- 1) Telling the waiter in advance of his needs, such as "Were in a hurry!" or "What's quick tonight?" might have avoided the situation altogether.
- 2) Using a calm tone and clearly stating the problem once it developed also could have resulted in delivery of an appetizer or bowl of soup and a conversation with the kitchen to speed things up.
- 3) Certainly, a word with the owner, the manager or even a waiter would have been a better choice, possibly resulting in a complimentary meal, a gift certificate or a free dessert or wine selection.
- 4) Thanking the business for the things they got right also could have given them a push in the direction of resolving the situation to his satisfaction.

Consumers usually want to be pleased with the services they receive and products they consume because they have invested their time and have given their hard earned money for the privilege. Businesses usually want constructive feedback because it gives them what they need to improve the products and services they offer. Whether you are complaining or expressing your appreciation to the airline, hotel, auto shop, dry cleaner, restaurant, phone company, carpet cleaner or cable company, communicating effectively will get results.

So, remember the following: Find the right person to talk to, be calm, be credible, give specifics, both as to the problem and possible solutions, expect and encourage a positive response, and be thankful when you get it.