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What's wrong with customer service?

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Readers reveal top gripes

Need help? Good luck. More and more, airlines are burying their phone numbers, cable companies are sidestepping your calls, and retailers are steering you to online FAQs. It's all about saving money—theirs, not yours. Although recorded messages insist “your call is very important to us,” many companies are driving a wedge between themselves and their patrons through poor use of technology and inadequate training of staff. The Better Business Bureau logged 1.1 million complaints against North American businesses last year, up 10 percent over 2009. In a new nationwide survey, shoppers told us what they dislike most about today's brand of care. Among our findings:

Frustration runs high

Sixty-four percent of respondents said that during the previous 12 months they had left a store because service was poor, and 67 percent had hung up on customer service without having had their problem addressed.

Callers want to reach a person

Seventy-one percent of survey respondents were “tremendously annoyed” when they couldn't reach a human on the phone; 65 percent felt that way about rude sales-people. And 56 percent felt that way about having to take multiple phone steps to reach the right place.

Demographic differences appear

Women were more annoyed than men when they couldn't reach a person by phone; men were especially annoyed by customer-service phone reps who pitched unrelated goods or services; people 50 and older were more annoyed than others by convoluted voice-messaging systems.

Face-to-face is out of favor

Only 16 percent of Americans prefer to deal with a customer-service problem in person. Twenty percent favor the phone; 2 percent, live chat. Fewer still prefer e-mail. Sixty percent of respondents said that their preferred method of contact depends on the nature of the problem.

Walmart and Sam's Club win the booby prize

One or both were among the worst for customer service in eight industries, including appliances, electronics, cell phones, and supermarkets. “Abominable” is how retail industry consultant Jack Abelson describes the state of customer service in the U.S. today. He attributes the decline to corporate America's focus on cutting costs instead of increasing revenue. “There is an almost complete failure to recognize and appreciate the value people can bring to the equation,” says Abelson, who terms good customer service “a profit producer.”

Tales from commenters on our website, ConsumerReports.org, reveal that some big-name companies have plenty to learn:

- When Mabel Eng of Bellerose, N.Y., bought the wrong version of the Bible at Walmart, a customer-service rep told her that books weren't returnable as a matter of policy as well as law. Eng asked for those rules in writing, and for the next 20 minutes, the employee searched in vain for the policy and a supervisor. Eventually, the rep agreed to try to credit Eng's charge card but doubted that would work. It did. As of early May, Walmart had no response to our question about Eng's experience.
- Bob Smith of Plano, Texas, contacted Dell when his 2½-year-old computer died while under warranty. After two weeks of conversations, Dell agreed to send a replacement, which took a month to arrive and was a different, refurbished model. “I must say bye to Dell,” Smith said. In response, Dell said it issues a refurbished computer if the broken one is more than 90 days old.
- During a move from the West Coast, Tom Jackson of Chattanooga, Tenn., contacted AT&T to end his landline phone service. He spent six hours on the phone, starting with a rep in India, where he faced a language barrier, and ending with a supervisor stateside. During that time, he was disconnected several times and had to repeat his story from scratch. “AT&T isn't stupid,” Jackson says. “I think they do this on purpose, hoping customers just give up.” An AT&T spokesman said that Jackson's experience was “far from typical” and “not acceptable” and that his initial responses may have caused him to be routed to an offshore center by mistake.

We surveyed almost 1,000 consumers nationwide to find the customer-service problems that infuriate people most. Respondents rated 12 practices on a scale of 0 (not annoying at all) to 10 (tremendously annoying). Differences in scores of 0.4 or less are not significant. The inability to speak with a real person on the phone was especially irritating to women and respondents 50 and older. Women were also more likely to be annoyed by unapologetic employees, the need to wade through automated phone-menu prompts to get help, and an inability to find a salesperson in a store. Men were more likely to be annoyed by customer-service sales pitches for unrelated goods and services. The youngest consumers in our survey, those 18 to 34, had the lowest tolerance for repair people who didn't show up on time. Thirty-five percent were tremendously annoyed by that situation, at least 10 percent more than for any other age group.

