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# Complain With Me

Dibeyendu Ganguly

**P**POINTING to the large number of service staff at a luncheon in her honour, Janelle Barlow says, "Such a waste—all these people standing around. From an American point of view, this is too much service." She actually has a point. There's a buffet and a bar, but the banquet hall still has a large number of waiters carrying trays of hors d'oeuvres, and beer, which no one seems to want. But they work the party anyway, happily disrupting conversations with their offerings of mushrooms and chicken tikka. Shaking her head, Barlow delivers the coup de'grace: "But then, India always throws people at problems."

But then again, the president and owner of the consulting firm TMIUS is a professional complainer. Barlow is the author of the best-selling *A Complaint Is A Gift* and giving feedback to corporates (and whole countries) and watching their reactions is part of her research.

Barlow may make time to tell the hotel about its "oppressive" levels of service. As she says in her book, customers who don't complain to the organisation usually go and do something far worse—they tell their friends, associates and perfect strangers about it. And everyone knows how damaging bad word-of-mouth publicity can be. The most casual "I had a quite a bad experience there once,"

from a friend is enough to undo millions of rupees worth of advertising and celebrity endorsements.

If a complaint is simply a statement about expectations that have not been met, Barlow puts some of the blame on advertising. "Companies raise expectations through expensive advertising campaigns, but then don't spend money on training their customer-facing staff to meet those expectations," she says, giving the example of American Express, which once ran a campaign saying "you're more than just a number to us". But, when a customer called their number, the inescapable first question still was "what is your number?"

American Express withdrew the ad when it realised how silly it was making the company look (TV show comics couldn't get enough of it). Other companies suffer more long-lasting damage on account of a mismatch between real and expected service. "Research shows that the average service brand loses 50% of its customers every five years and 97% of the multiple switchers say it was bad service that made them leave," says Barlow.

Bad service is far more than the lack



**YOU CAN'T BUILD YOUR POLICIES AROUND THE OCCASIONAL CUSTOMER WHO LODGES FRAUDULENT COMPLAINTS**

**JANELLE BARLOW**



**A customer who complains is always better than the thousands who walk away silently, says Janelle Barlow. The next time you are confronted by complaining customers, don't go red-in-the-face. Say, thank you instead**

of tender loving care. It's the airline whose delayed flight results in a missed meeting; the restaurant that serves stale food; the insurance company which takes its time processing claims or the manufacturer whose TV, cellphone or washing machine breaks down a month after its warranty period.

Faced with these kind of situations, customers don't always register a formal complaint. The reasons vary according to the personality of the customer, but some of the common ones are: "It would cost more to complain", or "I didn't know who to talk to", or "The last time I complained, nothing happened," or "I'd probably get more upset, it's better to just drop it".

"When customers complain, says Barlow, it's a sign that they care enough about the company to give it another chance. But quite often, companies blow that chance. Some don't respond to complaints at all while others just say 'sorry, there's nothing we can do'. Some blame the customer with a 'you must have handled it wrong' or 'you should have come to us earlier'. Others pass the customer all over the organisation till he or she gives up. The worst ones launch

into an interrogation with questions like 'how do we know what you say is true?'

It takes grit to complain to a large corporate about its service and research shows the one most likely to do it is a young, upwardly mobile male. Companies don't like complaining customers, and in some extreme cases they are actually viewed as blackmailers out to get a free replacement or activists who might haul the company to court if it admits to any wrong-doing. But as Barlow says, "You can't build your policies around the occasional customer who lodges fraudulent complaints."

A PhD from the University of California

If complaints are a gift, companies need to make the process as easy for the customer as possible. Today, most companies have call centres and it's important that their staff are adequately trained to handle angry customers without taking it personally. Then there are customers who prefer writing and send letters or e-mail. Here, says Barlow, the company should respond with a personalised letter, rather than a standardised one.

The cost of having disgruntled customers out there has escalated in the internet era, says Barlow, and companies need to monitor what is being said about them in the net. "One financial company has taken it too far by threatening any-

one who writes negative things. The goal is not to get feedback but to be aware of it. Another bad strategy some- is to anonymously write pos themselves and bad mouth. Any hint of pretence on the W come back to haunt the orgar Barlow. "Instead, companies ne conversations with customers, guided to blogs on the company same time, they shouldn't be p"

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