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New ways to complain

Airing your gripes online can get you satisfaction—or trouble.

Not so long ago, you had few options for expressing your dissatisfaction with a product or service. You may have told your friends and family about your experience. Maybe you filed complaints with state and federal regulatory agencies, the Better Business Bureau, or the local consumer-watchdog reporter. Similarly, if you were really happy with a purchase, there were few ways of getting your recommendation out there.

But all that has changed. Whether it's a slap-happy review of your new flat-screen TV on Amazon or a scathing critique of a car dealer on Yelp or Facebook, there are plenty of online outlets where you can post your opinions. And companies are paying attention.

Consider this 2010 exchange from TripAdvisor, a travel website where consumers share their experiences with hotels, restau-



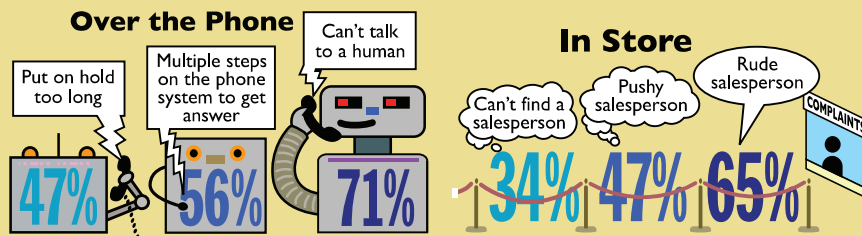
rants, vacation rentals, and attractions. A guest at the Viceroy Hotel in Santa Monica, Calif., posted a complaint about a checkout clerk who gave her a difficult time over a 20 percent discount she was entitled to at the hotel restaurant: "Would I stay here again or recommend it to friends? No way! Not after experiencing such rude, nonchalant treatment upon checking out!" the guest wrote.

The complaint caught the attention of the hotel's general manager, who posted her own message saying that management confronted the employee about the incident. She urged the former guest to contact her. "I would like to invite you back as our guest in the near future."

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Most annoying customer 'service'

We surveyed folks about their customer-service gripes. When seeking help by phone, people are irked most by voice-answering systems. In-store customers are most irritated by rude sales staff. Here are the percentages of people "tremendously annoyed" by these service issues.



Source: Consumer Reports National Research Center, March 2011.

ILLUSTRATION BY BOB ECKSTEIN

Ways to complain

Continued from page 1

she wrote. "Please accept my apologies and give us another opportunity to provide you with proper service."

We've seen Sears respond to dozens of consumer complaints posted on Twitter, where the company has a customer-service page (twitter.com/searscares) on its home-services blog (www.searshomeservices.com/blog), and on The Consumerist (www.Consumerist.com), a website owned by Consumers Union, the publisher of this newsletter. In many cases, Sears responded by providing information on how to con-

tact an employee who should be able to help with the problem.

WHERE TO POST

There are many places on the Web where you can post your comments:

► **Your own "social" pages.** If you have a blog, website, or social-media account (say, on Twitter or Facebook), you've got your own outlet for opinions or reviews. Its effectiveness will depend partly on how many people follow you or who find your comments through an online search.

► **Company sites.** Many manufacturers and retailers, such as Amazon, allow customer comments on their websites, and they often let the bad reviews stand along

with the good ones. We've seen some companies, including Walmart and General Electric, address consumer complaints posted on their Facebook pages.

► **Online communities.** A number of websites are devoted to sharing good and bad experiences, such as Angie's List, TripAdvisor, and Yelp. Others focus on complaints, such as Ripoff Report and Pissed Consumer. Check the box below, left for more examples.

Using more than one outlet can help you reach more people. Some complaint sites, such as MeasuredUp, try to get companies to offer refunds or otherwise address problems raised by customers. And some companies, concerned about their public image, monitor such sites and respond directly to complaints.

Even if you don't get satisfaction by posting, your comments might help others. Our research confirms that user opinions matter. Of more than 4,000 CONSUMER REPORTS online subscribers surveyed in 2010, 40 percent who reported researching a product category said they read user reviews. The percentages were even higher for 18- to 34-year-olds.

EFFECTIVE CRITIQUING

When posting a comment online, it's important to establish your credibility. Sure, a prolonged rant could make you feel better, but such cyber chest-pounding might not be taken seriously. Plus, your post might be blocked or removed.

When critiquing a company or product, first check the site's frequently asked questions and terms and conditions to find out what's allowed. Make your comment as brief as possible, and include facts. If you're being critical, mentioning the good along with the bad lets readers know you're a consumer, not a competitor out to drive up your own sales.

The opposite applies if you're being particularly glowing, especially in a product review. No matter how good a product is, surely you can find something that could have been done better or that readers should be aware of. If your post is one big swoon, you'll come off as a company shill, pushover, or neophyte.

Free speech can turn into expensive speech if you seriously dis a business on-

Where you can express your opinion

Website	Type of reviews
AirlineComplaints.org	Airline-related complaints or suggestions for improvement. Includes airline contacts.
Amazon.com	Reviews and ratings of products and Amazon merchants.
Angie's List (angieslist.com)	Reviews and ratings of local services and health professionals. Pay site, though nonmembers can submit reports free.
ApartmentRatings.com	More than 1 million apartment reviews and ratings.
Avvo.com	Reviews and ratings of lawyers and doctors. Includes library of legal and medical topics.
Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.org)	Charity watchdog organization with user reviews and ratings of nonprofit organizations. Includes tips and donor resources.
CNET (forums.cnet.com)	Discussions of electronic products, services, and companies.
Complaints.com	Complaints about products, services, companies, and professionals.
ComplaintsBoard.com	Complaints about products, services, companies, and professionals. Includes news and resources.
ConsumerAffairs.com	Reviews of products, services, companies, and professionals. Includes news and resources.
The Consumerist (www.consumerist.com)	Reviews and complaints about products, services, and companies. Includes news and consumer tips. Site owned by Consumers Union, publisher of CONSUMER REPORTS and this newsletter.
Edmunds.com (www.edmunds.com/forums/)	Reviews and discussions of cars and car-related products and services. Includes dozens of subject-specific message boards.
Epinions.com	Ratings and reviews of products and services.
MeasuredUp.com	Reviews of companies and professionals. Includes tips and contacts.
My3cents.com	Reviews and complaints about products, services, and companies. Includes consumer tips.
PissedConsumer.com	Reviews and complaints about products, services, companies, and professionals. Includes consumer tips.
RateMDs.com	Reviews and ratings of doctors and dentists. Includes access to medical-board records and top 10 lists.
RipoffReport.com	Complaints about services, companies, and professionals. Includes consumer tips.
TripAdvisor.com	More than 45 million reviews and ratings of hotels, restaurants, attractions, vacation rentals, cities and towns, and more.
TrustLink.org	A Better Business Bureau site with reviews and ratings of companies and professionals. Includes scam alerts.
Yelp.com	Reviews and ratings of local companies and professionals.





line, especially on popular sites. Companies and professionals have sued individuals who make comments they don't like. One case involved a San Francisco man who was sued in 2009 by his chiropractor for criticizing billing procedures on Yelp. The case was settled under terms that weren't publicly disclosed.

Some doctors require that their patients sign an agreement promising not to post comments about them on public sites. It's not clear how enforceable those agreements are, although doctors have been using them to persuade some sites to remove patient reviews. RateMDs.com maintains a "Wall of Shame" that lists the names of doctors using such agreements.

DON'T GET SUED

Sometimes companies sue critics even though there's little chance of them overcoming a free-speech defense. Because such nuisance suits are costly to defend against, they're designed to discourage people from posting negative comments at all. An increasing number of states have enacted laws barring such legal actions, known as SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) suits. The Public Participation Project, an organization dedicated to blocking these lawsuits, publishes information on state laws. (Go to www.anti-slapp.org and click on "Your State's Free Speech Protections.")

In 2004, a judge in California used the state's anti-SLAPP law to dismiss a lawsuit Sharper Image filed against Consumers Union. The suit was in response to a critical review of the company's Ionic Breeze Quadra air cleaner that appeared in the magazine. Sharper Image was required to

pay \$525,000 to cover Consumers Union's legal costs.

No matter what the laws are in your state, consider the potential repercussions before you post critical or embarrassing comments, says Mark Goldowitz, founder and president of the Public Participation Project and a lawyer who defends clients against SLAPP suits in California.

Remember that once you post something, it will probably remain on the Web for a very long time. Even if a site lets you modify or remove your comments, the initial post might get picked up by search engines or other websites. So people might read your initial rant without knowing you've since changed your mind.

Just because you didn't register or otherwise provide personal information when posting a review doesn't necessarily mean a company can't track you down, says Eric Goldman, an associate professor specializing in Internet law at the Santa Clara University School of Law. Similarly, don't count on a website's privacy policy to protect you when a company comes a' knocking with a subpoena.

Goldowitz recommends first preparing your comments offline and perhaps waiting a day. "The worst thing is reacting out of anger without taking the time to think about how this is going to be read by other people on the Internet," he says.

Make sure your facts are correct and can be supported. While you're legally protected when giving your opinion, libelous statements disguised as opinion—for example, "My opinion is broker John Smith stole \$5,000 from his clients"—are another matter. "Certainly don't muzzle yourself. That would be horrible," Goldowitz says. "But choose your words carefully."

He notes that some homeowners insurance covers you if you're sued for defamatory statements. If your policy doesn't, you can add the coverage at little cost.

If a business responds to your criticism with an offer to help or discuss the issue, by all means reply. If it resolves your problem, update your original post with the good news. But don't accept payment to change your opinion or account of the facts. Your integrity is worth more than that. If a company asks you to write a review and you're a satisfied customer, go right ahead. \$

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Is this the best you can do?



The next time you're ready to make a major purchase, look the sales clerk in the eye and calmly pose that question. If you

want to pay less than the posted price, you have to ask.

Yet year after year, the Consumer Reports National Research Center finds that most shoppers are reluctant to haggle. Sure, there's a chance the clerk might not budge. But we've found that shoppers who do try have at least a 50-50 chance of success haggling for things as diverse as computers, mattresses, and hotel stays.

According to a December 2010 survey, online shoppers for electronics were just as successful at haggling as customers in the store. So if you're shy or embarrassed about bargaining in person, you have other options.

A few tips to better haggling:

- ▶ **Know before you go.** Research prices and store policies, and have evidence of better deals from newspapers or websites at the ready.
- ▶ **Find fixable flaws.** If a product has blemishes, ask the seller for a discount.
- ▶ **Avoid an audience.** Merchants don't want everyone else asking for the same deal.
- ▶ **Ask a manager.** Sales clerks might not have the authority to give you a discount.
- ▶ **Offer to pay cash.** Retailers are charged transaction fees by credit-card companies.
- ▶ **Be nice.** Demanding a discount rarely works.

Tod Marks has covered shopping trends for CONSUMER REPORTS for 20 years.