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'Customer Rage' Is on the Rise

By Dayana Yochim, Motley Fool

(Nov. 3) - Consumers aren't just getting mad these days; they're out to get even.

According to a Customer Rage Survey released today, 15% of shoppers surveyed who received unsatisfactory service actually sought revenge for their suffering. Luckily for front-line customer service representatives, just 1% reported actually exacting vengeance (the details of which were not divulged in the study). A more composed 13% said they used profanity when interacting with customer service reps, and 33% simply raised their voice.

The findings of the report, conducted by Customer Care Alliance in collaboration with the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University, show that the relationship between sellers and shoppers is rocky, at best. A whopping 70% of the 1,012 survey respondents experienced "customer rage" -- their most serious consumer problem in the past year made them "extremely" or "very" upset.

"Most consumers characterize the service they get as 'acceptable' or 'average' -- and more people say it is getting worse rather than better," said Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting and co-founder of Customer Care Alliance.

He -- like most of us -- can't help but share a personal customer service horror story involving (spoiler alert) bad phone service from an airline employee.

Crimes Against Consumers

What industries raise our ire? The aforementioned travel and leisure sector, financial services and telephone service providers have the most unhappy customers. The most enraged survey respondents called out these service providers again and again. (On the other hand, small ticket packaged goods -- like your mac 'n' cheese, toilet paper, or toaster oven -- fare pretty well when it comes to delivering problem-free service.)

Shocked? Didn't think so. In fact, a July study from Accenture found that bad customer service was the No. 1 reason consumers switched phone carriers.



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Our main hang-up with the service these companies provide is, quite simply, that they waste our time. The Consumer Rage study asked angered shoppers what damages they suffered. More than half said "Time," 30% said "Money," and 5% said "Physical injury." The median amount of time spent trying to resolve a service issue was four hours, with an additional two hours spent on the complaint process alone and an average of 4.2 contacts with the company.

Please Continue Holding

The worst part is that the biggest boon to the customer-service industry -- the telephone -- has become the least effective (and most frustrating, for consumers) tool for handling complaints. "Thirty years ago the customer service problem was that most companies didn't have 800 numbers and extended service hours. Then in the '80s it changed," Broetzmann says. "Now everyone has toll free numbers and extended service hours, but you can't get anyone on the phone anymore."

Navigating through the modern phone tree has become almost comical. Want to talk to a living, breathing, human being? Stand on your left foot, look to the sun, and press a three-digit secret code -- and maybe you'll get through, Broetzmann jokes.

But the consequences for companies that discourage live service -- or at least make it difficult to get through -- are serious. "The advent and acceptance of automated telephone systems as a way for corporations to manage workload and ostensibly improve the level of service -- those systems have become one of the top sources of customer frustration and dissatisfaction."

What's Your Problem?

For those who do get past the Muzak, what's in store? Probably not an apology.

The Consumer Rage study found that just 25% of complainants hear "I'm sorry" from a customer service rep, but 59% said that's what they wanted to hear. Nearly 75% of customers wanted an explanation of why the problem occurred, but only 18% got it. Nearly half wanted a monetary refund, and 18% got it.



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"Corporations need to overcome the myth that customers are crooks; that customers want something for nothing; that customers are unreasonable," Broetzmann says. (The 1% who actually took revenge for their suffering, he says, most likely did so by placing repeated calls and creating enough of a ruckus to make it difficult for someone to do their job.)

More than anything, consumers want what the study calls "psychic currency," meaning an explanation, assurance, and an apology -- all of which cost nothing but a company's time and commitment to the consumer's problem. Says Broetzmann: "To deal in a genuine way with the rage that we see, corporations need to understand what it is that the customer wants: an apology."

Service With a Smile? Shocking.

It's hard to know the true ratio of snippy to sparkling customer service conversations. But the Customer Rage Survey points out that tales of bad service are sure to get around: 84% of complainants said they shared the story of their displeasure with their friends or others. Half said they would never do business with the offending company again.

Companies that impress customers don't go entirely unnoticed, though. Take the department store Nordstrom. In author Robert Spector's "The Nordstrom Way," the tale of a businessman who couldn't find a blue dress shirt with white cuffs for an upcoming trip is studied in business schools across the nation.

To accommodate the customer's need, a Nordstrom salesperson had the store's in-house tailor custom make the shirt from one blue dress shirt and one white dress shirt -- at no extra charge to the customer.

How To Complain

- Be clear about the problem. Outline the main points of contention before you complain.
- Know your rights. Familiarize yourself with the company's policies.
- Tell the service provider exactly what you want. An apology? A replacement? Clarification? Be clear and factual.
- Contact the relevant authority. Make sure the person you complain to has the power to do something about it.



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- Keep good records. Take names, track dates, keep receipts and all packaging.
- Stay calm. Escalation rarely brings the best results. Be polite but direct. An articulate complaint speaks volumes.
- Play nice. Keep the customer service Karma in balance by passing along words of praise when due.