

How To Write an Effective Letter of Complaint

By June Campbell

How To Write an Effective Letter of Complaint

June Campbell
campbelj@nightcats.com

Business Writing by Nightcats Multimedia <http://www.nightcats.com>

You're so mad you could spit. That #*^\$% company got your order wrong again. You're gonna fire off a letter that'll make made their head spin. Nobody's gonna treat you like that!

Sound familiar? If it does, you're not alone. We've all been there. The difference is that some of us write letters that get results. Others write letters that get us ignored or ridiculed.

Written correctly, a letter of complaint can be very effective at getting you the results you want. You might even get more than you expected. Some letter writers report receiving surprize gifts and merchandise in response to a well written complaint. Many businesses appreciate knowing when something is going wrong, and they will do what they can to create goodwill with a dissatisfied customer.

The following suggestions will help you write a letter of complaint that's likely to be read and acted upon.

Complain only when appropriate. Sending numerous, frivolous letters of complaint will get you nowhere. Send your letters only for genuine complaints, and only after initial communication with company representatives has failed. In other words, if the widget you bought didn't work as expected, you would ask the sales person or the customer service department to correct the problem before you fire off a letter of complaint to head office.

Address the letter to the correct person. You need to reach the person who has the authority to correct the problem. Inevitably, this will be a supervisor, a manager or a company executive.

If your complaint is with a local business, address the letter to the owner or manager.

If you're dealing with a local branch of a large corporation, you'll need to find out whether your complaint lies with the local branch or if the problem was created by policies set by a corporate office. If it's with corporate office, you'll send the letter there.

It might take some detective work to find out who should receive your letter. If you can't find out by asking, try the company web site, annual reports, or business directories in your local library.

Be courteous and professional. Avoid sarcasm. No matter how angry you are, sending a rude, discourteous, inflammatory letter will not help you get the problem corrected.

Keep it short. One page is all you need. The manager is more likely to read and act on your letter if you keep it brief, factual and to the point. No one has time or patience to wade through a six-page tome.

Be factual. Identify the problem and outline the efforts you have made to correct the problem. Remember the five rules of journalism: Who, What, When, Where and How.

Identify what you want. You have a complaint. What will it take to make things right? Do you want your money refunded? Do you want the product exchanged? Do you want a service contract extended? Do you want an apology? Stipulate what you want.

Remember to date your letter and include full contact information, including account numbers or any other info that the recipient might need to trace your problem.

State consequences when previous letters have failed to get the problem corrected. It is both unnecessary and ineffective to start out with threats of various punitive actions. Remember, the recipient doesn't appreciate receiving threats any more than you do. But, when previous attempts have failed, it's time to state what you are prepared to do, and when. You might say, "And, if I have not heard from you by the 30th of this month, I will take action."

Taking action could mean contacting your credit card company, filing a complaint with a consumer agency such as the Better Business Bureau, seeking legal counsel, etc.

Here is a sample letter that could be used for a first written complaint:

Attention: G. Smith, VP of Customer Relations

Dear G. Smith,

On August 19, 2002, I purchased a widget at Widget Store, 111 Main Street, Big City. On August 20, I returned the widget to your customer service department because it was missing Part #32 and could not be assembled. Your customer service representative ordered the missing part from your warehouse, telling me it would arrive within ten days.

Two months later, it has not arrived. I contacted your customer service department on August 30, September 15, October 1, and October 20th. On each of those occasions, your customer service representative assured me that the missing part is en route from your warehouse.

Today, I asked that my money be refunded since I am unable to use the widget without the missing part. Your customer service representative told me that it is not store policy to refund my money because I opened the package and partially assembled the widget.

I am writing you to request that my money be refunded in full. I cannot use the widget without the part that is missing.

I can be reached at the address given above, or by telephone at (your number).

Yours truly,
Dissatisfied Customer

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