



Action stations

You splash out good money on computer products and services, but what if you want to complain because something isn't right or doesn't work? Increasingly consumers are taking up their cudgels online in order to get a result. Ken Young reports

Nicky Campbell, co-presenter of the BBC's *Watchdog*, has become something of a byword in haranguing company MDs over shoddy goods and services. So much so that he is now one of the popular impersonations in Alistair McGowan's *Big Impression* TV show.

Although you can submit a complaint about a retailer by logging on to www.bbc.co.uk/watchdog, you are unlikely to be one of the few cases chosen for investigation by the programme. For most of us, complaining to a manufacturer involves getting passed around from one unhelpful call centre staffer to another in the vain hope of solving the problem.

But help is at hand. Increasingly buyers are turning to personalised online methods to get a resolution to their problems by using email, websites and weblogs. Some online services even chase complaints on behalf of consumers.

Have your say

The best place to start is How To Complain (www.howtocomplain.com). This independent site teaches businesses how to offer better customer service, while providing useful consumer advice in step-by-step guides. It has special sections for the retail and telecoms sectors, but its attempt to provide email links to well-known vendors leaves a lot to be desired. Most major companies just won't provide email addresses for complaints.

Next up are three sites that are operated by – for want of a better phrase – freelance complainers: ComplainDomain (www.complainsdomain.com), Principle Matters (www.principlematters.com) and Whingers United (www.whingersunited.com).

For £20 ComplainDomain puts together a letter that you approve and then send on. In this sense it is a letter-writing service costing £20 a go – not exactly cheap. But should this correspondence fail to resolve the problem, ComplainDomain says it will pursue the matter further on your behalf.

The operation boasts a number of successes in getting refunds, repayments in kind and formal apologies for its users. Alternatively, if you want to write your own complaint letter, check out the free samples on the BBC's *Watchdog* website.

One Dell of a headache

ComplainDomain MD Darin Jewell gets most complaints about Dell, Time, Comet, Telewest and PC World. However he declines to say how many are dealt with each year or how many complaints each of these firms racked up.

Jewell maintains PC consumers are hard done by: "Computer companies are now the most complained about sector, especially as some firms make it very difficult to register a complaint with costly technical support lines that you have to ring time and time again."

Time's PR Chris Woolford argues that being named and shamed by ComplainDomain is unfair: "This list is unrepresentative. We asked for all the complaints received and got only five – which we have dealt with. We sell 20,000 PCs a month so it's not surprising that there are some problems." Woolford advises people to log on to Romulus2 (www.romulus2.com), which he says has a more professional approach to consumer issues and is exclusively for PC users.

One for you, two for me...

Something of a rival to ComplainDomain, Principle Matters was set up in May this year by Bromley businessman Marc Houghton. His company model is rather like the ambulance-chasing law firms in that he levies around 10 percent (on a sliding scale) of whatever compensation he manages to retrieve for you.

Houghton's secret is that he never loses his temper and tries to find the best solution for buyer and seller. He admits that most of his work is over the phone, negotiating his way through call centre staff that are often unwilling to pass the call on to someone with authority.

"I never get angry with them because I know they are working off scripts. I just gradually work through them until I get to speak to someone who has the authority to do something about the complaint," says Houghton.



So what advice does he give the novice complainer? "Keep calm and be persistent. It's those that can be bothered to be persistent that usually succeed. Most people just give up rather than pursue it to a satisfactory conclusion." Houghton lists Vodafone and Freeserve as bringing more complaints to his service than any other companies.

What do we want

Some people choose to create their own protest site. Marie Griffiths bought a TV from Currys, part of the DSG (Dixons Stores Group), only to find it was faulty. Her frustration escalated when she found the firm's aftersales technical support department, Mastercare, was hopeless at satisfactorily dealing with her problem.

As the days of silence grew into weeks, Marie decided to take action by recording her daily attempts to get a remedy from DSG on a weblog (<http://mastercare.blogspot.com>). A weblog, or blog, is an online diary that can be created by someone with no web design experience and updated as often or as little as needed. Cunningly she also placed ads on Google to drive consumers to the site.

Marie's weblog listed exactly what she had done and also what response she had received from DSG. Perhaps most damaging to the firm, Marie kept an ongoing total of how much pledges of boycotts from sympathetic readers were worth. At its peak the weblog suggested that her campaign had led to over £250,000 being spent at DSG's competitors.

As a result of the press interest in her weblog, Griffiths has become something of

a media celebrity and anti-DSG champion. After two and a half months her TV was successfully replaced with a working model.

It is unclear whether Mastercare acted more quickly because of the weblog and the media interest it created or if it made no difference at all. But if you fancy going down this route, check out one of the main blogging sites (www.blogger.com), that will get you up and running in minutes.

An online protest is not for everyone, though. Griffiths' one-woman campaign clearly requires a great deal of energy and a degree of media savvy. Legal experts also urge against such action saying that there is a danger of publishing defamatory information. Ignorance is not a form of defence in such matters. Certainly, when you see that Griffiths' weblog republishes emails from disgruntled former DSG employees, it is easy to see how false information could easily be presented.

Share your views

A simpler and less time-consuming approach is to use websites that act as a focal point for consumers of particular products or services. Openwoe.com, for example, focuses on informing and updating BT Openworld customers. Users can ask broadband-related questions in the forums and there's also regularly updated news items.

NTLHell.co.uk was originally an independent site but it was bought up by NTL in April 02. It now operates as a useful resource managed by the company. Despite what some see as a sellout, it remains the best place on the web to air your NTL grievances.

A similar site is hosted by Telewest and edited by users (www.by-users.co.uk). It offers news and FAQ-type information as well as forums.

Internet users in the US have a long tradition of complaining online. Most American surfers are familiar with placing the word 'sucks' at the end of a company name to find a complaint site – for example, www.microsoftsucks.com. Although such sites can make an interesting read, they are of limited value to UK users with specific gripes. Perhaps it's time the idea took off on .co.uk domains?

And finally...

Have you ever wondered why firms rarely provide an email so that you can complain directly to them? The answer, of course, is that email addresses get flooded with more messages than firms can cope with.

Unusually for a CEO of a big IT firm, HP boss Carly Fiorina allows customers to email her via the company website. According to a leaked internal memo (published on www.theregister.net), Fiorina received 6,143 complaint emails in three months. Ironically many of them were complaining that HP had outsourced customer support to India.

Perhaps the rise in alternative online complaining has made firms such as HP realise that, even if you can't promise to answer customer emails, it's better to have a complaint address in place. ■



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