5 ways to get rave reviews and referrals



The Complaining Cow ®

It’s all about caring for everyone

Vulnerable people are frequently left without a resolution to a complaint. They can find it difficult to know how to complain, what route to take, what language to use, and if they don't get a satisfactory response they will give up more quickly.

This can be a huge problem for companies, whether they realise it or not. We all know that it can cost at least 5 times more to gain a new customer than to retain an existing one. However, how your teams or you handle a complaint, particularly with vulnerable customers, could have unintended consequences. What if, unbeknown to you, the customer has just had a bereavement, has mental health issues, is disabled or is elderly or is vulnerable in a host of other ways? The impact could be more than just you losing a customer.

Here are 5 ways to help you reduce the risk of unintentionally harming a vulnerable person:



1.

Think before you press “send”

In the current climate anyone could become vulnerable. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs or are freelancers currently unable to work.

Many thousands have developed mental health issues or have suffered a bereavement. This can make them vulnerable. A few years ago if you handled a complaint badly it may have just frustrated someone who was able to keep going until it was resolved.

For example, if you sent someone from pillar to post (a top common frustration for customers) they may just have got cross and kept going until the matter was resolved. Now, imagine if that person has depression and anxiety difficulties. It takes one of your complaints to a whole new level, doesn’t it? That person is not in a good place and is having to spend more time on something that affects them negatively could have very serious consequences.

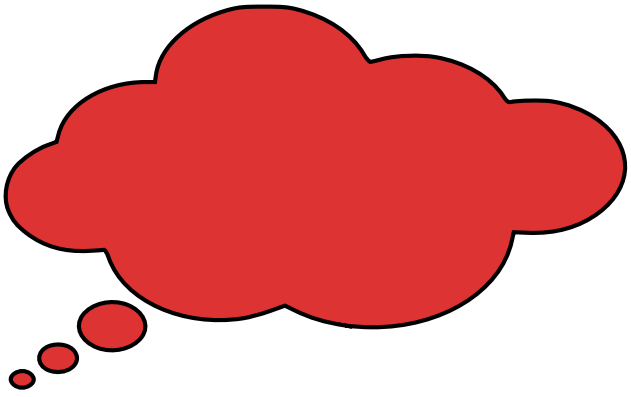
Now it is more likely than ever that you may be writing to someone who is vulnerable. 1 in 4 people is thought to have a mental health problem in their lifetime, so think about how this has increased since the pandemic. Add that to the increased number of people who are bereaved and/or suffering with their physical health on top of those already vulnerable.

Write a list of the ways in which someone could be vulnerable.

When you receive a letter/email, respond as normal. Randomly point to a vulnerability on the list. Now, read through your response and ask yourself some questions about how the recipient may be impacted by each paragraph.

With the next letter/email received, stop and think before you reply. Imagine that person is vulnerable, and choose the way in which they are. Then write and look through again and ask yourself (or colleagues) how the recipient may be impacted by every paragraph.

Trying out a mixture of these methods - and encouraging your teams to do this alongside other activities - will change how you think and respond to complaints over time.



2.

How to turn down customers gently

Sometimes a complaint is not justified. We have to accept that. There are many reasons. Sometimes people are rude, sometimes people exaggerate, sometimes people get their consumer rights wrong and sometimes people simply try it on. Whatever the reason, a customer sometimes has to be told no.

Take a piece of correspondence where you have not accepted a complaint. Look at what you or a team member has written. Take a vulnerability from your list. Then read their and your correspondence and critique yours. For example, would their vulnerability explain the poor English? Or the technical issues? Or not understanding how something works? Ask yourself what was good about the correspondence, what could have been clearer, was everything they asked answered, what was and what wasn't appropriate, etc.

Then, look at what the impact may be from your correspondence. If the customer had English as a second language would they understand it? Would someone who was elderly have preferred a different method of communication? Would your response contribute to an increase in someone's anxiety? Of course, you cannot predict every vulnerability that a customer could have but this approach may change the way you think about how and what you write.

If possible, do this with someone else with anonymised letters if in a big company or a colleague in another small business to help each other.



3.

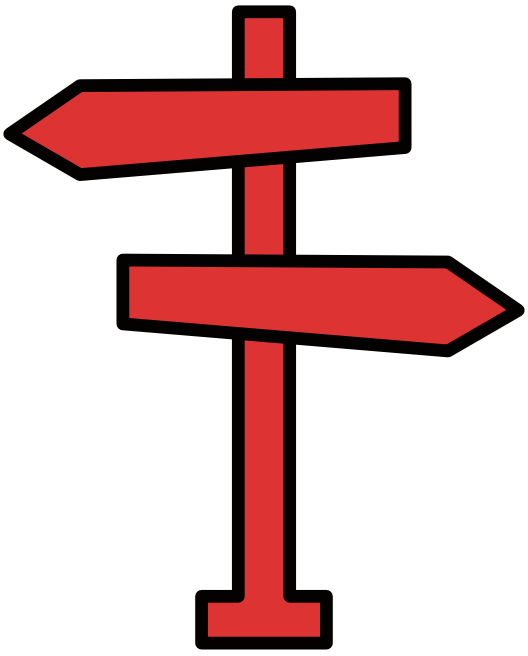
Help customers to help you with their complaints

Write a "How to complain" guide to give your customers before/when they purchase. Have it on your website always available and send it out with products. This may seem like it is inviting complaints but it is not.

The benefits of doing this are two-fold:

1) It gives customers confidence that you will take complaints seriously and do what you can to put matters right.

2) It helps people give you the information you need. So, for example, supporting them to ensure that they give you details of the fault, their details and what they want done to put things right. Many people when they complain don't know what they want, which makes it very difficult to know whether it is an apology, a partial refund, a replacement, etc. So, telling them how to complain effectively will make it easier for them to correspond with you and for you to deal with the issue.



4.

Imagine yourself as the vulnerable customer

Make yourself vulnerable! Be open to feedback and criticism. Follow up on some of your complaint responses. Look at those where you gave customers what they wanted, those where you didn't and those where you aren't sure..

Ask some customers how they rated your complaint. Did they understand it? Did they agree with what you said? Did it have all the information they wanted to know? Did they want to follow up with you but didn't? Why?

Ask them how the correspondence could have been improved. What would they like to have seen done differently?

Remember, this is incredibly useful feedback for your company and for you personally. Share it with colleagues. But also make sure you thank your customers for giving you their time and their feedback. Consider providing them with something to say "Thank you" but time this well, so they don't feel they have to say something nice!

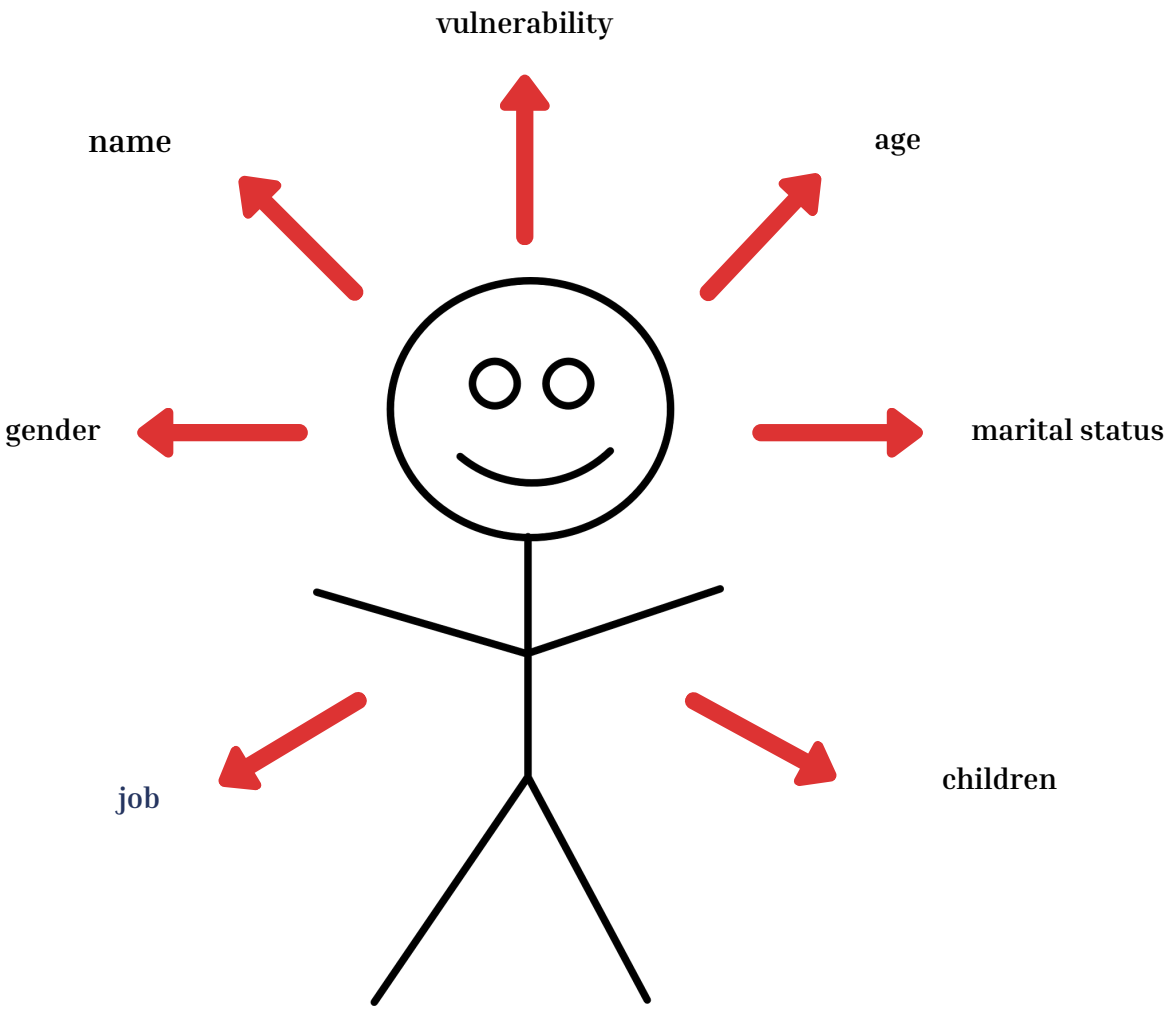


5.

Picture this!

Draw a stick person. Make up a persona. Give her/him a name, an age, a gender, marital status, hobbies, a job if you want them in work, how they travel, holidays, children, if they have any, and add a vulnerability. This could be a disability, age, bereavement, being housebound, in debt or mental health issue, etc.

Put the picture up on the wall. Next time you get a complaint from a customer whom you don't already know, imagine that they are the person you have drawn. Think about that as you write the response, this will help you to stop writing blanket statements and think about the possible impact your response could have. Even if the person is not vulnerable or has a different vulnerability you will not be referring to any specific vulnerability. This exercise simply focuses you to think about possible impact and have a more compassionate approach.



Who is Helen Dewdney, The Complaining Cow?

Helen has always had a passion for fighting injustice. She started complaining to companies that didn't keep to agreements or broke consumer law from the age of 11!

Now an established consumer champion, she challenges and supports companies to transform and improve their complaint handling through customer insights and perspectives. Helen's unique approach sees customer service through a new lens.

Her strong mainstream and social media presence mean that Helen regularly has the ear of consumers. She knows what they want in complaint handling and customer service. She supports businesses in focusing on continual improvement with ongoing challenge and support through consultancy, workshops and more.

In 2012 Helen started a blog, sharing stories of fighting companies with poor customer service. It grew into the publishing of two best-selling books, with another in the pipeline. Having gained recognition for her expertise and knowledge of consumer matters and complaint handling, she can often be seen and heard with her no-nonsense direct style in the media. As a credible and authentic expert, she regularly appears on programmes such as BBC Breakfast, The One Show and Rip Off Britain, amongst numerous others.



Mother of a 17 year old, The Complaining Calf, who needs little training, Helen likes prosecco and chocolate. Both of these frequently feature in her work wherever possible.



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Link up with people in similar roles to you. Share and discuss issues and ideas around complaint handling in my private group

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