

## Britons are complaining more but are companies listening?

Written by The Conversation

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Last year, more than 66m consumer complaints were made in the UK – almost double the number in 2013. That's the finding of the [Consumer Action Monitor](#) report from Ombudsman Services, the body responsible for tracking consumer complaints.

The most common sectors for complaints were retail (28%), telecoms (15%), energy (11%) and banking and finance (7%). The report calculated that almost half of people in Britain (47%) initiated some kind of action when they received poor service last year. So why the increase and who do people complain to?

Many people complain directly to the companies they have an issue with and some take their problems to third parties such as small claims courts, mediators and ombudsmen. But there has been a significant increase in the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter for airing grievances. More than 5.2m complaints were made on these and other online forums in the last year.

### Conduit for change

Traditionally Britons have been thought of as [reluctant to complain](#) – the stiff upper lip is a prized British trait. But evidence suggests that this is changing and social media is an important conduit for this change.

But now, people are able to complain in a number of ways, directly to the company, privately to their friends and even setting up Facebook pages specifically to complain about a company. One dedicated to Apple (“[I hate Apple](#)”), for example, has nearly 40,000 likes.

Surprisingly, however, many companies just do not seem to have factored in the impact of the exponential growth in the use of social media and the concomitant increase in its use for complaining. Many major brands still provide stock answers and even suggest that consumers telephone helplines or visit the store to get an answer to their queries or complaints. This totally misses the point of why people use social media as a quick and easy medium to contact companies – one with which people are increasingly comfortable.

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Most importantly companies need to respond to the 24-hour nature of social media. For example, when BA customer Hassan Syed complained about lost luggage, BA took eight hours to respond because its helpline was only open between 9am and 5pm. This was plenty of time for tens of thousands of users to [see the complaint](#) aired using a premium tweet:

Research by social media analytics company Socialbakers found that 6.6m questions were asked of brands on Twitter just [between October and December 2014](#) . Of these only 27% were responded to, which means that 4.8m questions were left unanswered.

Socialbakers metrics indicate that British companies are relatively good at responding – 41% of questions were answered in just over seven hours on social media. Germany is the best in terms of response rate at 46%, while the US scores only 17%.

But not everyone is out there complaining. The Consumer Action Monitor report notes that a staggering 71m problems were never taken up with the companies because consumers just didn't think it was "worth the hassle". Another worrying statistic from the report is that a third of people believe that companies cannot be bothered if something goes wrong and are only interested in money. This is not good for companies who will not know what went wrong for these consumers or have the opportunity to address the problem.

### Not all bad news

It's not all bad news. More and more companies are setting up Twitter pages so that customers can complain quickly and easily. LA Fitness is reported to have responded in minutes to complaints about its cancellation policy, while First Direct and Halifax have [also been noted](#) for their quick and helpful responses to customer tweets.

Companies need to get to grips with what these numbers tell them about how they run their businesses and how they treat their customers. Attitudes to complaining are changing – more people complaining may mean that if they don't get an answer then they will move their patronage. Research suggests that [as much as 80% of customer loss](#) could be due to product dissatisfaction or a poor attitude from the company.

Complaining has got a whole lot easier with social media. Consumers no longer expect to travel

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back to the shop with their faulty item; they tend you use Facebook and Twitter first to find out what the company is going to do about their problem. Companies need to both increase their responses and their response time to ensure that they give their customers a good answer because while some people do expect financial compensation, many simply want an apology.

*Isabelle Szmigin does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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