



**A weekly question/answer column**

**How Can I Complain About A Product I Purchased That Is Not Working Right?**

*Barbara Rowe\* answers:*

The federal trade commission estimates U.S. buyers are unhappy with 75 million purchases every year, but as few as 4 percent of those unhappy consumers ever complain formally. Being quiet about spotty service or a defective product is a big mistake. It is important for a company to be aware of its mistakes so the problem doesn't happen to someone else. However, there is an art to effective complaining.

- First, be an informed user. Read and follow the product and service instructions that come with your purchase. The way you use or take care of a product might affect your warranty rights. Also, save all contracts, sales receipts, canceled checks, owners's manuals and warranty documentation. You may need them to prove your claim.
- In some instances it will be best to contact the business that sold you the item or performed the service. In other cases you may want to go directly to the headquarters of the company or the manufacturer. Ask if they have a customer relations office and, if so, report the problem directly to them. Calmly and concisely describe the problem and what action you would like taken.
- Keep a record of your efforts to resolve the problem. When you write to the company, describe the problem, what you have done so far to resolve it and what solution you want. For example, do you want your money back or the product repaired or exchanged? When you call, keep a record of whom you spoke with and what they said.
- Allow time for the person you contacted to resolve your problem. Keep notes of the date, what was agreed on and the next steps to be taken. Save copies of all letters to and from the company. Don't give up if you are not satisfied with their response. There are third-party dispute resolution programs, trade associations, media programs, national consumer organizations and legal assistance programs that may be able to assist you.

**Making a complaint:**

- Check the product label or warranty for the name and address of the manufacturer or parent company.
- Because the name of the manufacturer or parent company is often different than the brand name, check the following books in the reference section of your local library for contact information: "Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations, Directors and Executives;" "Standard Directory of Advertisers;" Trade Names Director;" "Brands and Their Companies;" and the "Dun & Bradstreet Directory."
- Address letters, faxes or emails to the company consumer relations department or to the president if there is no consumer relations office.

- Call the company's toll-free number. Look for it on any documents you have received from the company, in a directory of toll-free numbers available at your public library or by calling toll-free directory assistance at 1-800-555-1212.
- Check the state agency (possibly the corporation commission or secretary of state's office) that provides addresses for companies incorporated in your state.

**What to say:**

- Include in a letter, fax, or email, your name, address, home or work telephone numbers and account number, if any.
- Make your complaint brief and to the point. Include the date and place you made the purchase, who performed the service, information about the product (such as the serial or model number, warranty terms), what went wrong, with whom you have tried to resolve the problem and what you want done to correct the problem. Give a reasonable time line for the company to respond.
- Be reasonable, not angry or threatening. Type your letter or make sure that your hand writing is neat and easy to read.
- Include copies, not originals, of all documents.

**What to do next:**

- You might want to send your complaint letter with a return receipt requested. This will cost more, but it will give you proof that the letter was received and will tell you who signed for it.
- Keep a copy of your complaint letter and all letters to and from the company.
- If you believe you have given the company enough time to resolve the problem, file a complaint with your state or local consumer protection office, the Better Business Bureau, or the regulatory agency that has jurisdiction over the business, e.g., banking, insurance and utilities commissions. Include information about what you have done so far to try to resolve your complaint. If you think a law has been broken, contact your local or state consumer protection agency right away.

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