

GUIDANCE ON CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE

WHY YOU NEED A CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE?

BENEFITS TO YOUR BUSINESS

Managing complaints successfully is a way to improve the services and status of your business. An efficient procedure for handling customer complaints can avoid unnecessary - and potentially expensive - disputes. It can minimise unproductive wasted staff time. It will also assist in maintaining positive relationships with your customers, and so will encourage repeat business.

The procedures need not be cumbersome and bureaucratic - and they should be appropriate to the size and complexity of your business.

The type of complaints procedure needed will vary from business to business. While smaller members may not have the same resources to devote to handling complaints as larger members, they too will find that there are commercial benefits to be gained from dealing effectively and efficiently with any complaints that may arise.

WHAT THE CUSTOMER WANTS

From a customer's viewpoint only three things matter if something goes wrong with the service provided and they therefore need to complain:

- How to complain
- Where to complain
- Will the complaint be dealt with seriously

Customers will assess your seriousness to deal with complaints by the extent to which your complaints system is:

- visible
- accessible
- fair

Visibility will depend on whether you have made your customers aware of the seriousness with which you handle complaints. The development of a short policy can help to make customers aware of your intention to deal with complaints.

Accessibility can be achieved by making sure that your customers know to whom a complaint should be made, and that the appropriate people in your business know how to deal with complaints.

Fairness means that you make sure that complaints will be properly investigated and will not be biased towards anyone involved. Following the steps set out in this guidance will help to improve the way in which complaints can be processed by you with the minimum of bureaucratic fuss.

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THE KEY ELEMENTS OF A COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

A good customer complaints handling procedure will ensure that all those working in your business are fully aware of how to handle complaints effectively. It may also promote a culture of customer service within the business. The complaints handling procedure should contain the following elements:

- A short written statement of the businesses complaints handling policy
- A procedure which should be adopted by the business when a complaint is received
- The maintenance of a record book which details all complaints received and the actions taken to resolve them

DEVELOPING A WRITTEN COMPLAINTS HANDLING POLICY

A written complaints policy need not be complicated. The policy is a simple statement to your customers that should they have a complaint then it will be dealt with efficiently and fairly. Writing down this statement will also help those employed by you to understand that such matters need to be taken seriously and that they must follow the complaints handling procedures properly. An example of a simple written complaints policy is set out below. For some this could form part of a wider customer care policy.

EXAMPLE OF A WRITTEN COMPLAINTS POLICY

The policy of our organisation is to deal with all customer complaints fairly. To achieve this we have implemented the following procedures within our business:

1. All complaints are recorded in writing in our complaints record book which will include details about the date when the complaint was received, the action required to resolve the complaint and the date when the action will be completed. Intermediate discussions about the complaint will also be recorded.
2. Any complaint will be acknowledged in writing to the complainant confirming that it is being dealt with in accordance with our complaints policy.
3. We undertake to investigate any complaint properly and fairly.
4. We will respond to all complaints within a period of three working days.
5. Where we find that any work is required or action needed to resolve the complaint then the work or action will be undertaken in the shortest possible time.
6. Where it is impractical to resolve the complaint to the satisfaction of the customer, the complaint may be referred to our trade association, the Building Engineering Services Association for assistance.

The named person below has overall responsibility for dealing with all complaints

Name:

Position:

Signed: (Principal)

Date:.....

It is important that the policy is understood by all of those who work in your business. They need to know about the policy since their co-operation in adopting the procedures for complaint handling will be a key to its success. Communication of the policy is also important to minimise any opportunity for difficulties and confusion within the business.

The policy should therefore be drawn up in consultation with appropriate staff and when completed it should be circulated to all those who work in your business. In larger organisations this may mean reaching agreement over the terms of the policy across several different operational departments.

DEVELOPING PROCEDURES TO DEAL WITH COMPLAINTS

A complaints policy will only be effective if your business has in place proper procedures to deal with any complaints that may arise. You may wish to draw up these procedures in consultation with your staff. Such procedures should be written down in clear language and should be simple to operate. They should deal with the following matters:

- Recording complaints
- Dealing with complaints
- Taking action to resolve complaints

The procedures should be reviewed regularly and should aim to help your staff provide an efficient solution to complaints which they receive.

You may also wish to set and monitor targets for acknowledging complaints, dealing with complaints, keeping complainants informed about the progress of the investigation.

SETTING UP A COMPLAINTS RECORD

Often complaints can be resolved quickly and satisfactorily if dealt with promptly and efficiently. However, they can sometimes escalate into long and bitter disputes simply because they are ignored. The aim of any complaints procedure is to avoid this problem and to deal with matters fairly so that you can establish where the customer has a justifiable complaint which requires a remedy. Training staff to deal with complaints may be the key.

A simple complaints form might help the person dealing with the complaint should give their name to the complainant. Obtain details such as name and address of the person making the complaint:

Example of a complaint record

Complaint Reference No

Complaint taken by.....
Position in organisation/Department.....
Date when complaint made
Time when complaint made.....
Complaint by telephone, fax, e-mail, correspondence
Name of customer
Address
Daytime Telephone Number
Evening Telephone Number
Job Reference
Contract date.....
Time of work.....
Employee carrying out work
Nature of complaint.....
Next steps advised

Reported to.....
Action to be taken
Response to customer provided
Further action

DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

It is important to establish the nature of the problem so that you fully understand what is being complained about. Recording the details will help. Try to obtain the facts by asking questions about any details that you do not understand. The following approach might help:

- Explain to the complainant that you do have policies and procedure to deal with complaints and that you need to record the details of their complaint
- Let the complainant talk about the complaint so that they feel that someone is listening to them -be sympathetic to their concerns.
- Try to stay calm even if the complainant gets angry- do no lose your temper
- Try not to argue with the complainant
- If there is an immediate solution to the problem then explain how the matter can be rectified
- If complaints are about an aspect of the business which such another department then record the details and let the complainant know that you will pass them on
- Explain what will happen next and the stages of your internal procedures to deal with the complaint

TAKING ACTION TO RESOLVE COMPLAINTS

Complaints that are easy to resolve can often escalate into disputes because no immediate action is taken to deal with them. It is therefore necessary to act quickly to resolve matters. The way in which organisations resolve complaints will ultimately rest with their size and nature of the organisation. For example, larger organisation may have a central customer care department with specially trained customer handling staff. In these cases complaints will be handled centrally. Other organisations may deal with complaints through individuals who have specific areas of operational responsibility.

Fairness in dealing with complaints will be important, and it is often a good idea for senior management to monitor the manner in which complaints are resolved and to review individual solutions with those responsible for resolving any complaints that are received.

Once you have made a decision about whether the complaint is justified you should let the customer know in writing the action you propose to take. Your letter should set out the way in which you will resolve matters and it should identify any dates or timescales by which such action will be completed.

In some cases it may be necessary to inform the complainant that having reviewed matters you feel that no further action can be taken by your organisation. You should do so politely in writing setting out the reasons why you believe that no further action will be taken on the matter.