

## **KEEP IT COOL AND TO THE POINT**

### **WHEN YOU HAVE A COMPLAINT**

An excerpt from “Betsy Ashton’s Guide to Living on Your Own” in Redbook and reprinted in Tulsa World 1 Aug. 1988: A11.

The consumer has grounds for a legitimate gripe in one out of every four purchases made in this country, but nearly 70 of those who have problems do not complain about them.

The one out of four statistic comes from a recent nationwide study sponsored by the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs and was cited in the current issue of Redbook, excerpted from “Betsy Ashton’s Guide to Living on Your Own,” by former television consumer reporter Ashton.

The evidence of consumer ripoffs runs like this: 37 percent of car purchases result in a problem, as do 65 percent of grocery purchases and 39-44 percent of appliance and automotive repairs. Almost one consumer in five pays erroneous utility bills and throws out defective cordless telephones.

Problems do get resolved when consumers speak up, and Ashton lists some do’s and don’t in protecting yourself from consumer abuse. They include:

- Do not get nasty. In most cases the individual you complain to is not the idiot responsible for Your problem.
- Do not write letters in script unless your handwriting is magnificent. No one can help you if your letter is undecipherable.
- Do not write your life history. Keep a complaint letter brief and to the point. Attach copies of supporting documents.
- Do not send original receipts with a complaint letter. Send copies.
- Do not threaten a lawsuit. A better tactic is to say you will take the case to small claims court, and do just that.

Here are Ashton’s suggestions on what actions will most likely win a solution to your problem.

- Identify the problem. Know what the problem is, when you noticed it, what you did to correct it, and what you want the merchant to do.
- Gather evidence. Put all documents in one file folder—the original sales receipt, warranty, repair or service orders, canceled checks or contracts. If the complaint involves shoddy workmanship, take photographs.

- Go back to the store that sold you the item or the shop that did the repair. In a pleasant manner explain the problem and allow the merchant a reasonable amount of time to resolve it.
- If there is no action or reasonable response, write a letter to the president or owner of the local shop or the president of a national corporation responsible for the product. If you do not know the manufacturer, the “Thomas Register of American Manufacturers” and the “Thomas Register Catalog File” list the makers of thousands of products.
- If the company does not respond to your letter or if it rejects your request, elicit third party help.

If your problem is with a local store or company, call your local Better Business Bureau and local, county or state consumer agency.

If your problem is with a service provided by a professional, such as doctor, lawyer, funeral director, plumber, collection agency, etc., your best bet may be to complain to the state board that licenses the person or shop.

If your problem is with a product or service provided by a national corporation, an industry group may have a complaint panel. Check the “Consumer Resource Handbook,” published by the Federal Office of Consumer Affairs.

If your problem is particularly hideous, outrageous or interesting, consider sending a copy of your request for help to a reporter.

- When all else fails, tell it to the judge. You might be able to get a quick, inexpensive hearing in small claims court.