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The Art of Complaining: Free help is available to resolve service issues

GOOD HART -- Dry cleaner ruined your favorite shirt? Who you gonna e-mail? ComplaintGirl!

Hot dinner cold and wait staff curt? Who you gonna e-mail? ComplaintGirl!

They may be catchy lyrics, but there's nothing funny about poor customer service, says marketing consultant Ami Woods. That's why she launched ComplaintGirl.com, a Web site that offers free professional complaint resolution.

"Customer service isn't what it should be on average," said Woods, who tackles everything from how to get the phone company to remove the mystery charges from your bill to how to get the airline voucher you were promised when you were bumped from your flight. "I just really believe that if you're not given the quality of service that you're promised, somebody has to make it right."

A Petoskey native and graduate of Harbor Springs High School, Woods grew up working in her mom's Good Hart General Store, where she assembled the chicken pies that are shipped all over the country. As a student at Hope College, she studied business, communications and marketing.

After an internship in Philadelphia, she got her first job at Chicago's 25,000-seat United Center, home of the Chicago Bulls and Blackhawks and one of the largest entertainment venues in the country. Besides personally resolving all guest complaints, she oversaw Disney-provided service training for 2,000 staff -- from housekeepers to the senior vice president of marketing and finance.

In 2004, she moved back to northern Michigan to manage the theater at Mackinac Crossings. And that was when she noticed a somewhat more casual attitude to customer service in the region.

"When I got here, everybody told me, 'You need to lower your expectations; you're in northern Michigan now.' If I hear that one more time, I'm going to kill someone," she said. "My position is that we are a resort area. The people

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who are coming to our area are from Detroit and Chicago. They don't have lower expectations."

Now she offers service training through her independent marketing business, amiwoods.com. Other services include copywriting and graphic and web design.

In an attempt to help improve customer service everywhere while resolving "one small issue at a time," she launched ComplaintGirl.com last spring. Consumers can submit their complaints online and get expert advice back on how to resolve them -- all without charge.

If it's successful enough, she hopes to pitch the idea -- as a newspaper column -- to publishers.

"Some people fight things and some people don't," said Woods, 34, who took her own cell phone company to task when it failed to replace her phone as promised after it got run over by a car. "They don't have the research skills and they don't know what their rights are. They don't know what tools they need to go back to a company. I wanted to simply offer up advice for people."

The site also offers support tools such as links to Consumer Affairs and the Better Business Bureau Online Complaint System. The BBB has provided dispute resolution for 96 years with an 80 percent resolution rate, said Ken Vander Meeden, president of the Better Business Bureau of Western Michigan.

While there are far fewer bad businesses than good ones, Vander Meeden said the number of consumer complaints has risen dramatically as the Web has become an increasingly dominant form of doing business.

"We all used to know who we did business with, with a handshake and without a contract," he said. "The global market has changed that significantly." As a result, he said, consumers should protect themselves by knowing as much as they can about a company before buying its products or services.

"In our 38-county service area we have 20,000 reports on companies. About 1,500 are bad apples," he said. "When in doubt, check it out. Get information. We have it. It's free. All you have to do is look."

Woods said ComplaintGirl.com is different than other consumer complaint Web sites, many of which are devoted to publicly displaying the wrongdoings of companies. Such sites are sometimes labeled "terrorist sites" by the Better Business Bureau because they arbitrarily post complaints that could hurt a company's reputation or credibility.

"Some are valid, but people have been known to lie, steal and cheat, which is a problem," Vander Meeden said.



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