

Don't Kill us with Kindness—
COMPLAIN!

February 10, 1975

Number 6

The purpose of this essay is to encourage every ISI® customer to quit that vast and much too silent majority of disgruntled consumers. Their listlessness disappoints me almost beyond expression.

I must confess, however, that I myself sometimes surrender to the same apathy when I, as a consumer, have been had. I sink back, innerly seething that I have failed to set some matter right and get my due. Worst of all, I know I have done just what was expected of me as a dissatisfied customer. I have *accepted* the situation!

Where ISI is concerned, don't let us get away with anything. Make sure you get what you pay for. If you don't, let me know about it. *Learn to complain!*¹

Any car owner knows what it means to deal with faceless corporations that ignore the consumer's need for individual attention. For the past eighteen months, for example, I've been trying to get Chrysler to fix our station wagon. No matter what their reportedly factory-trained mechanics have attempted, the car insists upon veering to the left. I'm no reactionary, so the possible symbolic significance of that doesn't bother me. But now that I think about it, perhaps I should have long ago presented the matter to Chrysler in that light. It might have accomplished something where all else has failed!

It's bad enough that the mechanics can't find what's wrong. What truly angers me is their and Chrysler's bland dismissal of my impatience. Apparently their ethic dictates that any car owner must expect this sort of thing. *That is what is wrong and needs to be fixed!* Neither Chrysler, nor you, nor I should simply expect *this sort of thing*.

I cannot afford the unique solution of moving to England, where with everyone driving on the wrong side of the road, a constant veering to the left would be less fearsome. If Chrysler's cars must veer, let the company adjust its slipshod manufacture so its cars will

veer to the right. The driver and his passengers will then, at least, be taken off the road and out of the path of oncoming traffic.

This little diatribe is probably so familiar that the reader may wonder why I have indulged myself. Perhaps I have a lower tolerance than others for incompetence in manufacture and service. My family evidently believes I do. ("Eugene! Why don't you just calm down!") They think my irritation useless overreaction.

Well, they are wrong. And so are you, dear reader, if you share their point of view. Can't anyone remember a time when a manufacturer, a tradesman, or a professional serviceman (from lawyer to carpenter) would have been insulted if you had raised the question of a guarantee of his work? Can't you recall when something was sold and could be bought with both the seller's pride and the buyer's confidence that the machine would work, or that the service would be found satisfactory. My children can't remember that golden era. Once upon a time only a lawyer might have thought you overly innocent in any such expectation. Nowadays the whole world would think you either stupid or mad.

Think a minute about product and service guarantees. What is it they guarantee? They may indeed imply that an item can be fixed or replaced, or the results of faulty service corrected—if you have the unexpected fortitude, time, ruthlessness, money, and savage temperament to persevere. Most corporations assume that consumers are on the whole too docile or dumb to act on a guarantee. What, in truth, is the guarantee? It is a guarantee that the machine probably *won't* work, that the commodity probably *isn't* up to some long-forgotten standard, that the service probably *has* been slipshod. Such guarantees are warnings. *Caveat emptor.*

Why do we accept this kind of thing? Why, especially, do we accept it from the ap-

Send your complaints (about ISI services, we mean) to the President (Eugene Garfield, Ph.D.)

Yes, when things go wrong with your ISI product or service (as we know occasionally they may), we want you to complain. Direct to the President. Write him a letter. Or give him a call. Tell him what's really on your mind.



One thing's for sure. He'll listen to your problem. And while he can't refund your taxes (or raise them), *he can and will take action to solve your problem*, because it's our problem as well.

But please remember one thing. If there's been a mistake, don't keep quiet about it. Make yourself heard. Loud and clear. Send your complaints directly to the president. Dr. Eugene Garfield, that is, president of ISI.



parently helpless representatives of those same large corporations that bombard us with advertised assurance that they are "listening," and that they "care," that their guarantee is a "clincher," that our satisfaction is their deep concern. Obviously it isn't. If it were, they would spend as much money on product quality assurance as on the advertisement of their guarantees. It is our *dissatisfaction*—especially the unlikely possibility of any effective expression of it among a mob of docile consumers—that bothers them.

What bothers *me* is that they seem to find little relation between our expression of dissatisfaction and any defect in what they sell or incompetence in what they perform. Many years ago, I recall, a frustrated automobile owner gave vent to his impotent anger by painting lemons all over his car. He continued to drive his 'lemon' around the city. The reaction of the automobile manufacturer was not to replace the car, but to enjoin him by law from such a spoilsport attempt to damage its good name. Few people found the outcome any cause for amazement.

What is the point of these remarks? As far as ISI is concerned, I want every customer to be an outrageous consumer activist. My family knows how easily I become irritated as a frustrated consumer. But that is nothing to irritation at work when I find evidence that ISI could possibly be guilty—or thought guilty—of the same arrogant or careless incompetence that is daily served up to the public by almost any industrial giant you can name. It is insufficient comfort to find, as on occasion I do, that ISI's customers accept our mistakes or our lapses with good grace. We appreciate the customer's patience in such cases, but that is not the object of our business. When we do less than we should and less than you have paid for, I insist that you *complain*. You do me and my staff an eventual and deep disservice if you do not. You will literally kill us with that sort of kindness.

As a boss and a human being, I behave badly at times. I am proud to say that I behave worst in this kind of situation. Recently I received a letter from a 'patient' subscriber. My explosive reaction caused my secretary and the

Vice President for Administration to hurry to my office expecting to find me in an apoplectic fit.

The subscriber had ordered an article through our *OATS (Original Article Tear Sheet)* service. It was sent but he didn't receive it. He waited a few weeks and wrote again. He got prompt response the second time, but the wrong article. He telephoned us on the *OATS* Hotline to ask again for the article he wanted. The employee who answered wanted to satisfy the customer, and promised to get the article personally. Intending to do so, the employee didn't bother to fill out the appropriate order form. Intending to do it 'personally', he failed to explain the problem to anyone else, and he left the next day for vacation! A week later the customer called again....

I won't continue the case to its conclusion. The customer had the patience of a saint, and he did get his article. I admire his patience for what it tells me about him. But I blame him for assigning to ISI, and to me as its president, the same standards of performance he has evidently come to expect from so many other companies. He should have called me long before he finally decided to write to me—just as perhaps I should have called the president of Chrysler some time ago. There's a difference, however. I doubt very much that I would get through to the president of Chrysler. At ISI you *can* and *will* get through to me. Three things will interrupt me at work, no matter the importance of what I may be doing at the time. Standing orders are that I am always to be interrupted by a family emergency, an employee grievance, or a customer complaint. None has priority over any other.

But I want the buck to stop at every level of ISI's operations. When it doesn't, when we don't perform as we should, when you are not satisfied, *complain*. Complain *immediately*, and complain if necessary *to me*. As I have said above, to do anything else is to kill us with kindness.

1. Garfield, E. Learn to complain; the ultimate responsibility is with the individual, not the corporation. *Current Contents* No. 29, 18 July 1973, p.5-6