

I'LL SEE YOU IN PRINT

by

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When taking on Big Business in America, one does well to choose one's weapon carefully. Moral outrage, for instance, is a waste of time. Big Businesses have whole departments geared to cope with the morally outraged. They are called Customer Service or Customer Satisfaction departments, and are armed with suggestions on where to find satisfaction elsewhere -- one's local service centre, for instance, one's local retail outlet perhaps.

Some years ago, when my one-year-old computer began running SSSSSSSSS's and AAAAAAAAAA's across the screen for no apparent reason, I was cast into desperate gloom. The machine was one month out of warranty, and the manager of the local service centre confessed that the keyboard on my model was a lemon. All he could do was replace it, at a cost, with a refurbished lemon.

I knew exactly what lay ahead. After the trip to the repair shop, the parts ordered, the parts unavailable, there would be more trips to the repair shop, the bracing for disaster every time I switched on the computer, the phrases of outrage visiting me in the night, until, finally, the letter-writing farce would commence.

In this case, I started out, as usual, with a detailed history of woe. And, as usual, back came a letter from a Customer Satisfaction Representative, assuring me that never had the company heard such a complaint as mine. Were the warranty still valid-- If they could be of any further assistance--

I wrote another letter, this time on University stationery and signed myself "Professor." Even if professors are not held in high regard in this country, the veiled threat of a university full of students veering towards the competition might, I thought, spur my company into providing me with some real satisfaction, a functioning keyboard, perhaps.

I was wrong. What I received was the standard letter of surprise and reassurance, with the greeting rearranged. "Dear Professor--"

And so I began to telephone, long distance. I spelled out the story to one Customer Satisfaction Representative after another. I even threatened legal action, but this blunted old tool did not even merit a response. After a while, the Customer Satisfaction Department receptionist recognised my voice and accent. When I called, every representative was either on the telephone already, or had just stepped -- skipped? leapt? jumped? -- away from her desk. And no one returned a call.

By the time I was on my sixth refurbished keyboard, the mere sight of the computer in the morning could unsettle my whole day. I decided to try a new weapon: "Dr." Doctors, I understood, matter enormously in America, and, even though I was the wrong sort of doctor for the part, how would the company know? I wrote to the President.

The Supervisor of Customer Satisfaction wrote back -- the standard letter. Doctors, it seemed, ranked as poorly as lawyers and professors in the corporate world. And nothing could unsettle these people from their maddening rhetoric of caring intransigence.

And then, one day at lunch, a colleague suggested I might mention that I was a writer. I might back this up, he said, with the odd newspaper or magazine clip. What did I have to lose?

The suggestion seemed a little extreme to me, a bit embarrassing, too. But I was on refurbished keyboard number seven and getting nowhere. And so I sent off yet another letter to the President, this one on my own letterhead, using no titles, and I included a few clips.

Two days later, there was a message from the President's personal assistant on my answering machine. Would I call back, collect, she asked? When I did, she wanted to know how I was feeling today? Her voice was soft, and she sounded as if she had mastered the art of smiling and speaking at once. Would I find it acceptable to receive, overnight express, as a courtesy from the company, their new, state-of-the-art keyboard, she wanted to know? And, with it, a leather carrying case for my computer? A two-year warranty, perhaps?

Since then, my weapon had served me well. It has triumphed for me with a major airline (frequent flier miles unrecorded), and a hardware manufacturer (emergency surgery). There was also the washing machine that spewed oil all over the floor. "Faulty design," said the local service representative. "Normal oil," the company's chief mechanic assured me over the telephone. One week after I sent The Letter, a new washing machine arrived. And it has never spewed oil.

On occasion, of course, I come up against failure. There was the local physician, for instance, who charged not only for minor surgery, but also for the removal of the stitches. This I knew to be irregular. I wrote The Letter. But he simply had his billing clerk respond. Pay up, she said. I wrote again, with more clips. He passed the bill on to a collection agency. I paid.

Doctors, I came to understand, are not Big Business. They are small business. They rely, for their trade, on each other and on word-of-mouth. For Big Business, it is the printed word that is terrifying. One word in the wrong direction is worth a thousand ads.

Pulled in by such an ad, I abandoned my old long distance telephone company about a year ago and switched to its chief competitor. But then, just last week, it occurred to me that I seemed to be paying rather a lot to be saving the sort of money the ad had promised. In a vigorous moment, I dug out the original plan and compared the rates against the charges made. Consistently, I had been overcharged 35%-63%

I called Customer Satisfaction and reached a Representative who said she was truly sorry that I had had such a bad experience, and would I care

to hold for a moment while she went over my bill? Or should she call me back at my convenience? I held. When she returned, it was with the news that the bad experience was due to what sounded like the computer billing program analysis data system. I had been overcharged \$161.44 for three months' worth of long distance phonecalls, for which she had authorised credit, and was there anything else she could help me with? Yes, I said, she could go over the figures with me as her total was considerably lower than mine. Immediately, she rolled into her calculations -- six minutes for an international call at the discount rate, three minutes with an operator assist minus the discount for calls outside plan hours-- But I have never used an operator, I said, I always dial direct-- "If you'll let me finish?" she barked suddenly.

And then I knew. It was time for The Letter. What is your last name, I asked her? And the name of the president of your company? And his address? I switched on the computer, typed in the date. Dear Sir, I typed, I write you in complete frustration . . .