

Customer Complaint Handling Procedure

SOP · US · Updated 2026-07-13 · Square brackets are placeholders to replace with your own details.

A customer complaint handling procedure is the written process your team follows when a customer says something has gone wrong — how to take the complaint, how to de-escalate, what each person is authorized to resolve on the spot, when to escalate, and how every complaint gets logged. It gives frontline staff a script for one of the hardest moments in the job.

Complaints handled well are cheap and often win the customer back; complaints handled inconsistently become refund disputes, one-star reviews, and chargebacks. The difference is rarely the goodwill budget — it is whether the first person who hears the complaint knows what they are empowered to do.

This template gives you a ready-to-edit procedure: intake and de-escalation steps, resolution authority limits, handling for written and online complaints, the categories that always escalate, and the log that turns individual complaints into operational fixes.

Purpose and scope

This procedure sets out how [Your company] receives, resolves, and learns from customer complaints across [channels — in person, phone, email, social media, review platforms]. It applies to all customer-facing staff and managers.

A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction about our products, service, staff, or premises — whether or not the customer uses the word "complaint".

Roles and responsibilities

- All customer-facing staff: acknowledge and attempt first-contact resolution within their authority limits, and log every complaint.
- Manager on duty ([role]): handles escalations on shift, approves remedies above staff limits, and decides whether a complaint needs the complaints owner.
- Complaints owner ([name/role]): reviews the complaint log [frequency], responds to written and review-platform complaints, and owns this procedure.
- [Name/role]: handles complaints alleging discrimination, harassment, or harm — these are never resolved at the counter.

Taking the complaint

1. Stop what you are doing and listen without interrupting. Let the customer finish before responding.
2. Thank them for raising it and apologize for their experience — apologizing for how they feel is not an admission of fault.
3. Ask questions until you can repeat the problem back accurately: what happened, when, and what they have already been told.
4. Ask what outcome they are looking for. It is often smaller than you expect.

5. Fix it on the spot if it is within your authority: [list — e.g. replace the item, remake the order, refund up to \$[amount]].
6. Escalate to the manager on duty if the remedy exceeds your authority, the customer remains dissatisfied, or the complaint involves safety, allergens, staff conduct, or discrimination.
7. Log the complaint before the end of your shift: date, customer, issue, action taken, and whether follow-up is owed.

De-escalation basics

- Lower your voice and slow down as the customer gets louder — matching volume escalates, contrast de-escalates.
- Move the conversation away from other customers where you can: a quieter corner, the end of the counter, a call-back.
- Use the customer's words back to them ("so the order arrived cold, twice") — feeling heard defuses more anger than any refund.
- Never argue the customer's motive, quote policy as a wall, or say "calm down" — explain what you can do, not what you cannot.
- If a customer becomes abusive or threatening, disengage and get the manager on duty; staff safety outranks the complaint. [State the house rule for when to ask a customer to leave and when to call 911.]

Resolution authority

First-contact resolution is the goal, and it only works when limits are explicit. Frontline staff may resolve complaints up to \$[amount] per customer per visit using [remedies — replacement, refund, comp item]; the manager on duty may authorize up to \$[amount]; anything above that, or any pattern of repeat claims from the same customer, goes to [name/role].

Every remedy is logged with its value. The log is what lets you keep limits generous — abuse shows up in the data, not in tighter rules for everyone.

Written and online complaints

1. Acknowledge emails, letters, and review-platform complaints within [number] business days, naming who is handling the matter.
2. Investigate before replying: check the complaint log, POS records, security camera footage [if held], and speak to the staff involved.
3. Respond within [number] business days with what you found, what you will do, and one direct contact for anything further.
4. On public review platforms, keep replies short and civil, never share personal details, and move the conversation to a private channel. Never pressure a reviewer to delete a review — offer to fix the problem instead.
5. If the customer remains dissatisfied after the response, escalate to [name/role] for a final reply.

Complaints that always escalate

Any complaint suggesting someone was or could have been harmed — an injury on the premises, an allergic reaction, a product fault — goes to [name/role] the same day and is handled under the relevant safety procedure, including preserving the product or evidence. Do not offer a remedy that could look like closing the matter down before it is investigated.

Complaints alleging discrimination or harassment by staff are escalated to [name/role] immediately and handled under our HR procedures, not resolved at the counter with a refund. Complaints that arrive as chargebacks, demand letters, or from a lawyer go straight to [name/role] — respond through the right channel, not from the shop floor.

Logging, trends, and review

Every complaint goes in the complaint log at [system/location]: date, channel, category, remedy, cost, and owner. [Name/role] reviews the log [frequency] for repeat categories — three complaints about the same thing is an operational fault, not three unlucky customers. Logs are retained for [period] and feed into training, supplier reviews, and product changes.

This procedure is reviewed [frequency, e.g. annually], after any complaint that escalates to a formal dispute or chargeback, and whenever channels or authority limits change. Owner: [name/role]. Next review due: [date].

How to use this template

1. Set the frontline authority limits first — a procedure without a refund limit staff can use unsupervised will fail on the first busy shift.
2. List your actual channels in the scope section, including review platforms, and name who monitors each one.
3. Rehearse the intake and de-escalation steps at a team meeting using your last three real complaints as scenarios.
4. Set up the complaint log before publishing the procedure, and make logging take under a minute — or it will not happen.
5. Agree with [HR/owner] exactly where discrimination and safety complaints go, and put a real name on it.
6. Check your state's rules on refund and return policy disclosure and make sure your posted policy matches what this procedure promises.

Official guidance

- › [FTC — Business guidance](#)
- › [FTC — Consumer Review Fairness Act guidance](#)

This template is provided in good faith and for general information — it is not legal advice. Adapt it to your organisation and, where your sector carries specific legal requirements, have the finished document reviewed by a qualified adviser. The live version at <https://trainedteam.com/templates/customer-complaint-handling-us> is kept current; this file is a snapshot.