

How angry customers get revenge (and create civic protest)

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In the first study to explore how consumers attempt to gain revenge against corporations that have wronged them, researchers from Arizona State University find strong parallels between consumer complaint Web sites and other civic protest movements. Consumer Web sites use rhetorical tactics to address injustice, identity, and agency – turning personal betrayal into a "cause" worthy of public attention and support.

"The Internet is changing the power of negative word-of-mouth," write James C. Ward and Amy L. Ostrom in the September issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*. "Customers who create these Web sites frame their grievances to the broader public much like civic protesters."

Consumers are now creating complaint Web sites that reach out to millions, tell stories of injustice at length, and sometimes attempt to create "communities of discontent" focused on particular companies. When analyzing hundreds of complaint sites focused on personal product or service failures – but not political or environmental grievances – the researchers found that, like in many other protest movements, consumer protesters often "stereotype those they identify as responsible for an injustice as not just mistaken or wrong, but evil." Companies targeted by the complaint Web sites include American Express, United Airlines, and DaimlerChrysler.

"Studies have shown that people are prone to react to betrayal in several ways to counter the negative impact to their self-esteem," explain the authors. "First, people who have been betrayed sometimes seek social

evidence that denies the insult to their worth. ... Second, people who have been betrayed seek revenge."

Almost all the protesters said their target firms had "betrayed" them, and 90 percent felt a sense of disrespect or indignity as a result of the firm's actions. A slightly lower percentage (80 percent) said they constructed their sites to warn other consumers about the firm.

Citation: James C. Ward and Amy L. Ostrom, "Complaining to the Masses: The Role of Protest Framing in Customer-Created Complaint Web Sites." *Journal of Consumer Research*, September 2006.

Source: University of Chicago

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