

Unhappy customers: Everyone has a right to complain, and does

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We've all had that sinking feeling when we got home and a purchase turned out to be damaged, or worse yet, we had no warranty with which to dispute the damage. Are some consumers disadvantaged by income, race, education, or age and therefore less likely to return that product for a refund or an exchange?

Consumer satisfaction surveys and research historically labeled some groups -- poor, less educated, younger, minority [consumers](#) -- as "disadvantaged" in that they do not complain to a Better Business Bureau (125 offices nationwide) when they have a bad purchase experience. Although even assessing these trends has been controversial, research from an upcoming issue of the [Journal of Consumer Affairs](#) disputes this old [stereotype](#).

The survey analyzed over 24,000 complaints filed within a thirteen year period and matched the complaints to U.S. Census Bureau data detailing characteristics such as income level, race, age, and education. Researcher Dennis Garrett remarks, "We found that a consumer's level of education, age, and minority status were not strongly linked to their complaining behavior. However, consumers with lower incomes were less likely to complain as were consumers in rural areas."

The authors emphasize that any consumer can be vulnerable in the marketplace and must be assertive in seeking remedies from companies, even if they feel disadvantaged by their lack of income. They recommend that support for this consumer action be supported at the

public policy level in order to encourage consumer empowerment.

More information: This study is published in the Spring 2010 issue of *Journal of Consumer Affairs*. www3.interscience.wiley.com/joi/123309943/abstract

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