

## **Consumer Protection in Cyberspace**

Unlike the offline environment, where consumers enter a store, inspect potential purchases and judge for themselves the trustworthiness of a seller, the online world does not provide the same opportunity to use a "buyer's instinct." Rather, many consumers are forced to proceed on faith, knowing precious little about the seller to whom they are entrusting their credit card data.

The online medium offers different facilities through which commercial activities may be conducted. The online medium can be seen as a collection of different media united by common use of computer-to-computer communications at a distance. The forms of online communication that are significant to e-commerce are the World Wide Web, newsgroups and e-mail. The online marketing websites may be simple or elaborate and may allow less interactivity to the consumer. The simplest form of a marketing website is a page that presents the user with company's name, some description of the products or services it offers and means of communicating with the company. The most advanced commercial sites allow consumer to purchase products online. In addition to maintaining its own website, a company may advertise.

### **E-Consumer Support and Service**

E-commerce is more about personalized support and service. E-consumer is a seeker of information before he makes a buy decision. Hence, the ability to collect product information and make comparisons between the different product offerings from different providers is often viewed as one of the main competitive challenges of e-shopping and is therefore a key aspect of the online shopping experience. For example, price and product comparisons have been made easier by the development of "shopping bots". Websites such as Amazon.com and Flipkart.com enable buyers quickly to compare products, prices and availability. In other words, e-consumers are being assisted at every step by the technology.

Significantly, at e-marketplace, an e-consumer is not alone. There exists a community of e-consumers helping each other in every possible manner. For example, eBay, an auction site provides a platform for buyers to rank sellers on the basis of their business dealings. Bad reviews against a particular seller would mean no further business dealings with that seller on eBay platform. This is a self-regulating process. Similarly, a site called Epinions.com provides an "open source" style of review for products of all kinds, with visitor providing all the material. The company makes no attempt to edit any of this, but once posted, the reviews themselves are rated by other users.

Consumer support and service in the digital medium is one of the means to protect not only the organization reputation but also provide an opportunity to redress the consumer complaints and

grievances. Consumer service is concerned with giving e-consumers the opportunity to talk to the organization and to receive personalized responses.

There are a number of different avenues through which consumer service and support can be delivered: (a) E-mail support (b) Newsgroups, chat rooms, message boards, blogs (c) FAQs (d) Consumer service information (e) Feedback forms (f) Helpdesk support.

### **1. E-mail Support**

E-mails are the best means of communication between the consumer and the organization. If handled effectively, the consumer will be duly satisfied and the organization will learn more about the types of difficulties that consumers have with its products or services and evolve solutions to those problems.

E-mail services can be expensive to operate due to the personalized nature of the response to begin with. But by incorporating technology, the system may be so programmed to produce an answer from its databank automatically.

### **2. Newsgroups, Chat Rooms, Message Boards, Blogs**

These services allow consumers to communicate with one another. These are often being used to share knowledge and create a self-help group. In the present day environment, such services help in creating awareness among consumers. Blogs are the latest edition in this discussion centric online environment. Blogs are a kind of personalized e-diaries carrying views of the blogger; others may join and post their views.

### **3. FAQs**

Frequently Asked Questions are common consumer-service resources. They are the most common questions posed by consumers, which are collected, together with their answers, and can be viewed online. The only disadvantages with FAQs are that they are not personalized.

### **4. Consumer Service Information**

It provides relevant information to the consumer, which may include product specifications, compatibility charts, pricing, warranty details etc. Such an information resource helps the consumer not only in arriving at a decision, but also safeguards him against any artificial price increase by a retailer.

## **5. Feedback Forms**

These are the forms through which customers can complain or provide valuable comments about the service and the products provided by the organization. These forms are valuable assets from the point of view of consumer trust and retention.

## **6. Help Desk**

Help desk support system in a form of toll free number, provides real time help to consumers. It works 24×7, wherein call center executives listen to complaints and grievances and try to solve problems.

It is thus imperative for any organization selling services or goods online to provide to its consumers a system of online help. Such a system would resolve initial disputes amicably, which may crop up between the consumers and the organization.