

## **SPECIAL REPORT**

# **How to Write “Complaint” Letters (Or Any Letter of Request) Guaranteed to Get You The Results You Want Practically Every Time (Including Letters to Big Corporations)**

By Bob Burg

Based on The Five Principles of Ultimate Influence as discussed in *Adversaries into Allies: Win People Over Without Manipulation or Coercion*

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Whether you’re dealing with an individual person or a small or large company that has in some way wronged you . . . perhaps through a malfunctioning product, poor service, or in some other way, attaining satisfaction can often be a frustrating and inconvenient process. Worse, it often fails to produce satisfying results.

From now on, you needn’t ever feel like a helpless victim caught in a web of bureaucracy. By understanding the principles involved in learning how to write letters that get results, you’ll cut down on the amount of frustration you’ve experienced in the past and dramatically improve your odds of obtaining the results you desire.

This process works both when dealing with a specific individual with whom you have experienced a particular challenge or with a corporate decision-maker. In this case, “decision-maker” doesn’t necessarily mean the President or CEO, but simply someone at the level where a decision in your favor can be made.

This report will focus on attaining results from a large company. Once you can do this, your confidence will soar and then, using the exact same principles, you’ll have greater success when dealing with smaller companies and individuals, too.

Readers often ask me if it’s even possible to attain satisfaction when you’re displeased with a large company. After all, from a distance, they can seem intimidating – even frightening, can’t they? It may appear to you that those huge corporations with whom you do business really don’t care too much about your satisfaction – certainly not enough to break through their usual bureaucratic and robotic methods and go out of their way to correct their mistakes to please you, their valued customer.

### **On The Other Hand**

Or, is that assessment actually true? Do these huge corporations actually care about keeping you as a happy, steady, referring customer? You bet they do! And, if you handle yourself and the situation correctly, you’ll be amazed at how quickly and thoroughly your situation will get resolved.

Here I will outline the steps that will get you generally positive results in these situations from now on. You will experience less stress and a greater feeling of confidence in yourself and in your abilities to communicate effectively. The key is knowing how to separate yourself from the crowd, get a company's attention, give them reason to listen, and then provide the correct language to persuade them to take the correct action. That's what we'll cover here.

**Step #1: Begin with politeness.** This would seem to be self-evident, but is it? Have you or anyone you know ever called or written a company and begun the conversation or letter with a scathing litany of everything wrong with that company and its products? Not good. Not only is it a lousy way of doing things in and of itself, but totally counter-productive in terms of getting what you want.

Hey, if you have a complaint, sure, they need to hear about that. And the good ones actually *want* to hear about it. But the seemingly nameless and faceless people who first hear your complaints – as well as those at the top who can make the decisions that the “front-liners” can't – want to be treated with kindness and respect as they seek to understand and resolve the problem.

Once you successfully “have their ear,” the principles of “Winning Without Intimidation” will get you the results. In fact, you'll find that the respect and courtesy you show these people is what will separate you from everyone else who complains – and ends up feeling frustrated and discouraged instead of getting the problem solved.

Here's a quick example: You are writing to the customer service department of Acme Widgets because the widget you purchased keeps breaking down. Even though a local repair representative came out and fixed it twice, it continues to function erratically. You now find that the local service reps are not responding to your calls in a timely way. When they do get around to responding, they are telling you that there's really nothing they can do.

So, you call the Acme's corporate headquarters. The first person you speak to, while nice enough, doesn't seem to know how to get the situation handled to your satisfaction. You speak with another person and she doesn't do any better. You politely ask who is in charge of customer satisfaction. It takes you two or three tries, but eventually you find it is Patricia Hamilton.

You have her name, her title (Vice President, Customer Relations) and her address. How do you begin your letter? Let's consider one possibility:

*Dear Ms. Hamilton,*

*It is with absolute disgust that I write you. Never have I been so frustrated in dealing with a company that promised so much, delivered so little, and was so unresponsive and inept in dealing with the problems caused by one of its products.*

{Sound of buzzer} Wrong.

Now, don't misunderstand me; this *will* get her attention. It will also signal her that you are just like the other 95 percent of complaining customers who gripe even when they are wrong and are often more trouble than they are worth. After all, Ms. Hamilton probably doesn't want to deal with someone like this personally. Would you?

"Fine," you may be thinking – "but I'm the customer. I'm always right. They should bend over backwards to make sure I'm satisfied." That's nice in theory, but in reality it rarely works that way. Just like most of us, corporate employees look at nasty people as people they'd rather not have to deal with.

Here's a better approach:

*Dear Ms. Hamilton,*

*Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to read this. After hearing so many great things about your Widget and eagerly purchasing one (and being quite impressed after the first use!) some unfortunate experiences have occurred, both in the malfunctioning of the product and the eventual lack of customer service on the local level soon afterwards.*

You've done three very important things here:

1. **You thanked her.** Everyone likes to be thanked, right? By doing this, you showed her respect. She is probably not used to that. So, already, you've separated yourself from the "complaining masses" and elicited her attention in a very positive way.
2. **You began talking about the product in a positive way.** Instead of just insulting the product and company as most complaining customers tend to do, you actually said something *nice*. Again, you've continued to separate yourself from most of the other people Ms. Hamilton deals with.
3. **You introduced the existence of a problem.** We'll continue looking at this item in the next step.

**Step #2: Introduce the challenge you are having with the product or service.** This is the point where you share the fact that you are having a challenge which you "regrettably" need to point out to the company. Let's look again at what you wrote in the above example, and underline the critical language:

*Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to read this. After hearing so many good things about your Widget and eagerly purchasing one (and being quite impressed after the first use!) some unfortunate experiences have occurred, both in the malfunctioning of the product and the eventual lack of customer service on the local level soon afterwards.*

Only after two positives did you very tactfully mention that there are some problems that need to be discussed. You have her attention. People who approach a complaint this way are much more listened to than those who shoot from the hip with insults.

Here is another example of how the main body of your letter might read:

*Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to read this. After hearing so many good things about your Widget and eagerly purchasing one (and being quite impressed after the first use!) regrettably, I'm now having some major challenges with it. Surprisingly, and after initially wonderful customer service from some very kind and friendly company representatives, I'm now feeling quite frustrated with what seems to be an uncomfortable situation for everyone involved.*

That is powerful. Even when you finally introduced the negative, you still managed to surround it with kindness. By this point, Ms. Hamilton loves you (and practically any other person in that position would feel the same way). Not only have you thanked her and begun talking about the product in a positive way – and then very tactfully mentioned the problem that you are now having with the product – you have also given honor to the very people who have not served you as they should. People in Ms. Hamilton's position notice and appreciate these things. She now knows, without question, that not only are you a reasonable person (they like those types but don't often come across them) but you are, without question, win/win in nature.

Please understand that those who complain the loudest, and with anger and insults, are often in the wrong. It's amazing how frequently that happens. If you really think about it, though, perhaps it really *isn't* that amazing. After all, aren't the people who "fly off the handle" in anger typically the ones who don't think about what they are doing as deeply as those who use consideration?

Whether you agree with that assessment or not, what's very important is that the person to whom you're addressing your letter most likely does. This is why you continually give yourself the edge by following this methodology.

**Step #3: Compliment the company for its dedication to customer satisfaction.**

Indirectly let them know that it's because of their fine, upstanding reputation in this particular area that you are confident they would want to know about your problem. Again, let's print out what we have so far, and we'll underline the new part:

*After hearing so many good things about your Widget and eagerly purchasing one (and being quite impressed after the first use!) regrettably, some challenges have occurred. Surprisingly, and after initially wonderful customer service from some very kind and friendly company representatives, I'm now feeling quite frustrated with what seems to be an uncomfortable situation for everyone involved.*

*Knowing the fine reputation of your company and your commitment to customer satisfaction, I thought you might want to be made aware of the situation.*

How could anyone with any sense of pride in their company and its reputation fail to be moved by such a statement? In practically every case, this person will do everything possible to live up to the fine standard that *you* have set for them! As Winston Churchill said, “I have found that the best way to get another to acquire a virtue is to *impute* it to him.” Yes, assign them with a trait, and they will often do their very best to live up to it.

**Step #4: List the actual challenges.** Now it’s time to logically and unemotionally list the actual problems, challenges and circumstances you’ve experienced. What’s so very important is to do this without anger and without unnecessary wordiness. Also, whenever you can, even try to provide an “excuse” on behalf of the other person explaining why they did not come through for you. Let’s look at an example of this (we are picking up from step #3):

*The first two times I used the widget I was delighted by its fast action and easy handling. It was the third time I used it that it began starting and stopping. I called the local customer service department and spoke on the telephone with Carolyn, who was very helpful and immediately sent over a technician. Carl arrived right on schedule (which we greatly appreciated), was very polite and seemed to have fixed the problem. Unfortunately, the very next time I used the widget, the same thing happened.*

*Again, Carolyn sent over a technician, Dan, with the same apparent positive result. Unfortunately, the next time the same thing happened. When I called customer service next I spoke with another person. She looked up our file and let me know that according to the report, the widget should be working fine and there wasn’t a lot more they could do.*

*As I’m sure you can imagine, her statement concerned me a bit but I chalked it up to the fact that it could have been a very busy day or perhaps she was new and hadn’t been introduced to the superb way your company handles its customers.*

*However, unfortunately, since that time, we have not been able to get a service person to come out.*

So, you did a wonderful job of explaining the challenges with the product, as well as with the customer service department, while being about as kind as a human being could possibly be, and even providing a “reason” for their non-responsiveness. Please understand that, because you are doing this, everything you say that is negative has a lot more impact.

Here’s another hint: Keep your paragraphs short. This way, they are easy to read and follow, and your individual thoughts and challenges will be easier for the person to pick up and decipher. It’s important to make it as easy as possible for Ms. Hamilton to understand the message.

**Step #5: Provide the “Call to Action.”** Here is where you let the company know exactly

what you want them to do. Do you want them to fix the product, send you a replacement, give you your money back? Whatever it is, let them know here. Let's look at how we might do this:

*Ms. Hamilton, while I would originally have been happy simply to have the widget fixed by customer service, I am now at a point where I'd like one of two outcomes: either to have Acme Widgets send me a new unit as a straight replacement, or refund my money.*

*While a refund would be acceptable, what I'd really prefer is a replacement unit so I can enjoy the original promise of benefits that prompted me to purchase it in the first place. It would then, of course, be my absolute pleasure to "brag" to others I know about how much help the Acme Widget has been and how Acme's corporate customer service department so willingly helped me.*

*I'm sure the situation with the local customer service department was simply an aberration of what is usually an excellent part of your company.*

Here you have done two things that are very, very effective.

1. **You politely, but in no uncertain terms, let her know what you expect.**  
Remember, while they honor a customer being respectful and polite, they also need to know that you are quite able to fend for yourself.
2. **You let her know that, should they come through for you and provide the satisfaction you desire, you'll be happy to refer them to others** (remember, because of the way you have handled yourself throughout this letter, at this point, everything you say is very credible). At the same time, you've also very subtly, let her know that if you can "brag" to others about the good, you can also let people know about the bad. Believe me, this point will not be missed. People in Ms. Hamilton's position know that people who handle themselves as you do tend to speak softly and carry a big stick.

**Step #6: Close the Letter:** Now it's time to close – politely. You do this by once again thanking her for her time and providing an easy way to contact you. Let's look at one example.

*Again, Ms. Hamilton, I thank you so very much for your time, and I trust, without question, that appropriate steps will be taken. I look forward to many years of doing business with your fine company.*

*Should you wish, please feel free to contact me at (555)555-5555 or at the address at the top of this stationery.*

*With best wishes,  
Name*

Here, you humbly (i.e. without arrogance) expressed your confidence that she would “do the right thing.” Your exact wording was “appropriate steps will be taken.” That is showing confidence in her ability to act correctly. This is much better than presumptuously and somewhat patronizingly telling her that you trust she will “do the right thing and get another Widget sent to you” (after all, you already suggested that).

And, of course, you ended by making contacting you easy for her, and signed off with “With best wishes.” A nice touch.

After taking this approach, you can expect to receive a letter (and *not* a form letter) with profuse apologies and the offer to handle this situation in a way that will suit *your* wishes.

Suggestion: Go back and review the various elements of this letter. As I provided several examples of some of the elements, to reprint the letter would mean I’d need to mix and match. Instead, go back and just see what resonates with you.

### **Something Else I Hope You’ll Find Helpful**

Here’s an example where I took the same principles and related it to leaving a voice mail for the company CEO. You’ll notice the same basic elements that were involved in the above.

### **Complaints with Humility Get Better Responses**

When writing a letter of complaint or leaving a complaint on an answering machine or voice mail, state the facts with humility. If possible, begin your communication with praise. Mention that you certainly don't know nearly as much about that person's position or business as do they. Then, when you mention something that is "right on the mark" – even if it's not positive – your credibility with that person increases even more.

After visiting several different stores of a particular franchise operation and receiving absolutely terrible service at each and every one, I decided to call the company headquarters and voice my displeasure to the CEO herself. She wasn't in, but I did reach her voice mail and decided to simply leave a message.

Since this event took place several years ago, and I didn't realize then there might be a need to remember my words verbatim for use in a book, I can only give you a paraphrasing of my message. I know I can get close to the original words, though, because I would use this same method any time I was in a similar situation. The message went something like this:

*“Hi Ms. Smith. This is Bob Burg calling from Jupiter, Florida, If you'd like to call me after hearing this message you're welcome to, but it certainly isn't necessary. I'm a*

*fellow entrepreneur and a very loyal and usually quite satisfied customer who has enjoyed using and referring your products for years. I thought you might be interested in a few incidents at your Florida stores.*

*Unfortunately--and very unlike my usual experience with your company's excellent customer service people--I was put in a very challenging situation which didn't work to the advantage of your store, myself, or the other customers. Had this event happened once, even twice, I'd have shrugged it off, knowing your company's dedication to the happiness of your customers. After three separate occurrences – although I don't pretend to know your business – quite frankly, I thought you might want to know. If you'd like to speak with me further, my name is Bob Burg and I'm at 561-575-2114. Thank you for your time. Make it a great day."*

Do you think I received a response from this huge corporation?

Absolutely. Not from the CEO herself, but from her personal, right hand man. We spoke on the phone, and not only was he very apologetic, he was very grateful that I called and made him aware of the situation.

People in that position place a lot more importance on a complaint made by someone who acts humbly, logically and civilly. Troubleshooters have to deal with ranters, ravers and screamers all day long. They are a dime a dozen--more like a penny.

By positioning yourself politely apart from the negative crowd, you increase your chances dramatically of *Winning Without Intimidation*.

### **Would You Like One More?**

Here's another one; this an actual letter to a major airline from years ago. I hope you enjoy it.

### **Winning Without Intimidation with The Airlines**

I'm often asked how to write letters to giant corporations when displeased with their service, or when other satisfaction is desired. Most people apparently feel that the bigger the company, the less they care. I've always felt the opposite, and maintained (and, I believe, proven) that if you write the letter correctly, in a way that separates you from everyone else, applying true *Winning Without Intimidation* principles, you will in fact get very specific, personal attention and responses. And, more often than not, satisfaction.

Most people believe it just won't work, and that you'll never receive a personal response. Well, I'll tell you, 95 percent of the time it does, and you will. The following is an example. I use it not to impress you, but to impress "upon" you that you can in fact get what you want, and have everyone come out a winner.

An airline I had flown lost my luggage. Although they were diligent in looking, they never did recover it and finally asked me to fill out a claims form. Despite my conservative claim for a certain figure, I received a form letter with a check for a fairly minuscule amount. I sent a letter to the Claims Manager, politely voicing my feelings and asking them for a more reasonable reimbursement.

The following is the letter I sent. Please understand that this is not the airline upon which I have all my frequent flyer miles, so "keeping" my business absolutely did not enter into the picture.

August 31, 2000

Ms. xxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx  
Claims Manager  
xxxxxxxxxx Airlines, Inc.  
5555 xxxxxx Avenue  
xxxxxxxx, xx 55555

Dear Ms. xxxxxxxxxxxx,

Thank you for your correspondence of August 14, 2000. That is when your check in the amount of \$420.00 (copy enclosed) arrived.

I was a bit surprised by the amount. As you'll recall, my claim (copy enclosed) was for quite a bit more than that figure. In your letter you acknowledged that fact, and claimed that, "... in the absence of sales receipts or other substantiation, we have no valid basis for increasing the amount of the settlement."

Ms.xxxxxxxxxx , I can certainly appreciate the fact that there are people in this world who will - well, let's call it as it is - lie, and claim to have lost more than the actual figure. That is actually nothing more or less than theft. It's understandable that you and your company must guard against that, and use common sense in making that determination.

Admittedly, I don't keep most receipts for my clothing, including those from a couple of years back. I assure you, however, that I made, if anything, a conservative estimate of what was lost by {your airline}. This was on a flight from Newark, NJ to Miami, FL, without a stop or change along the way. I'll certainly be glad to give you the number of the place where I buy my suits. The name of the store is Jacobson's; (555-555-5555) a high quality, somewhat pricey store. I can also have sent a list of charges made over the past two years just to prove that's where I buy my suits, however, I don't know which of those charges are for the clothes I had with me.

I did not ask to be reimbursed for everything lost, because I could not remember everything I brought for the four day trip I was on. But everything I claimed was, in fact, lost by your airline. By the way, the \$420.00 you sent might have paid for my luggage alone, although that is quite doubtful. It definitely did not cover the rest.

Please do the right thing and resend a check for the proper amount.

Sincerely yours,  
Bob Burg

cc: Mr. xxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxx, C.E.O.

Now, here's the body of the letter I just received.

Dear Mr. Burg:

Enclosed is the check for \$1080.00 of the balance of your claim. Thank you for the opportunity to resolve your claim to our mutual satisfaction.

Despite the impression you may have of us a result of your baggage problem, we do value your business. I hope that you'll give us a chance to rebuild your trust in xxxxxxxxxx by choosing to fly with us again soon.

Sincerely yours,

xxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Every letter I write of this genre has the following in common: Politeness, understanding, and a call for positive action. One thing missing in this letter was the usual compliment regarding how much I typically enjoy doing business with them. I really hadn't used them previously, so I didn't write it. I also would not normally use the phrase, "please do the right thing" but, in this case, I felt it was an addition that would help.

So, please don't ever feel you can't write to anyone, no matter how big, with the expectation of complete satisfaction. So long as you do it in a polite and respectful way, with positive expectations, you'll be amazed how often it will yield the results you desire.

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Bob Burg is coauthor of the *Wall Street Journal* Business Bestseller, [The Go-Giver](#), a business parable that has sold well over 250,000 copies in 22 languages. A presenter at company conferences on relationship marketing and business development, *The Go-Giver* is his fourth book to sell over 250,000 copies.

His newest book is [Adversaries into Allies: Win People Over Without Manipulation or Coercion](#).

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