

“The customer is not always right”: Frontline employees’ perspective and  
coping with illegitimate customer complaints

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## ABSTRACT

Although customer complaints are valued and serve as a critical feedback and as the improvement of service quality there is an increasingly large number of incidents when customers complain deliberately and incorrectly. The behavior of such complaining customers represents a serious and important problem for hospitality industry. This research paper touches upon the investigation of the illegitimate customer complaints in the hospitality industry from the perspective of frontline employees. A questionnaire was distributed to 78 frontline employees of 6 luxury hotels in Dubrovnik area. The questionnaire was used to measure perspective and coping of the participants with illegitimate customer complaining behavior. Findings of this research suggest and can serve as a plan to develop more effective coping methods and training programs on how to deal with illegitimate customer complaining behavior incidents.

## KEYWORDS

Illegitimate complaints, hospitality industry, frontline employee

## INTRODUCTION

Differences between customers' expectations regarding service they want and that they receive from the service provider is defined as service quality. A customer perception is based on comparison of their previous service experiences with their current service expectations. If there is a dissimilarity among current service expectations and previous experiences then the service will be defined as deficient and insufficient, however if the gap is closed, perception meets the expectations, then the service is considered as valid and adequate (Vazquez et al.,

2001). In order to meet customers' needs, companies tend to extend their range of tolerance by implementing "The customer is always right" concept in their business policies. This concept is fully customer focused and as a result the companies are likely to compromise on their decisions even though customer may not be right and they might experience financial loss.

#### *History and adaptation of the "customer is always right" concept*

This idea was first proposed by Harry Gordon Selfridge, the founder of London's Selfridge Stores. Selfridge's goal was to make the customer feel special and as if they were right by motivating his staff to do so, in order to transform customer dissatisfaction into loyalty and financial gain. The reason why many companies still follow the "customer is always right" concept is their awareness of how important is keeping current customers. According to Mendler (2019) customer acquisition is far more challenging and costly than customer retention. Although many companies tend to believe that the focus should be on attracting new customers, the reality is that the success of a business highly relies on retention of customers. Customers are the core of any business therefore it is crucial to maintain the relationship stable in order to keep the business existing (Martin, 2012).

#### *Adaptation to current market*

With the help of technology everything is more transparent and available, and while that may be positive in many cases, sometimes it can be harmful for the business and its reputation. Customers are empowered to do both, criticize and acknowledge the work of the companies, therefore every customer might become the brand ambassador as well as a potential threat for the company. If the customer is not treated as expected and feels that the delivery of the desired service did not meet his needs, the customer is more likely to leave reviews or spread his dissatisfaction to others and thus, this may result in a backlash. This is why the concept is

more valuable now than ever before (Mendler, 2019). Although this concept is implemented mostly in the hospitality industry it can be found in every other branch of industry. By the observation and analysis of many researchers interested in this concept in today's market the idea that the customer behavior is contradictory to this concept. In theory it may be as such but in practice it is becoming less about reasonable customer dissatisfaction and more about abusing the employees and the companies. Customers are engaging in different types of misbehaviors in order to harm the company or gain extra value for themselves. In previous researches these types of customers are often described as "customers from hell" (Zemke & Anderson, 1990), "dysfunctional customers" (L. C. Harris & Reynolds, 2003) and "unfair customers" (Berry & Seiders, 2008). Different studies have shown that such behavior can cause financial and psychological threats for both employees and the companies (Fullerton and Punj, 1993, 2004). Encountering and experiencing illegitimate customer complaining behavior not only can harm the company and cause financial lost due to a large number of complaints but the employees are the one in target. Coping with illegitimate customer complaining behavior may cause psychological challenges, lack of motivation and job dissatisfaction in employees.

#### *Legitimate vs. Illegitimate customer complaints*

According to Reynolds and Harris (2005) customer complaining behaviors are encouraged by different organizations due to value of complaint towards service recovery. Legitimate customer complaint is always a result of a service failure and can be seen as a positive criticism that can provide insight in service processes and as a result may serve as a potential improvement strategy. On the other hand, illegitimate customer complaints are defined as those deliberately fabricated, unreasonable or dishonest behaviors. Customer dissatisfaction is not closely related with illegitimate complaints. (Joy Huang Zhuowei, et al.) There are cases when a satisfied user fakes complaint in order to gain extra value to his demand that was not

intended for him to receive in the first place. (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981) Studies has shown that there are few different types of illegitimate customer complaints. The type of illegitimate customer complaint that occurs the most is the opportunistic complaint. The opportunistic complaint is directly connected with the reason why customer engage in such behavior. Ro and Wong (2011) defined opportunistic complaining behavior as “the behavior in which a customer complains in order to receive material gain by exaggerating, altering, or lying about the fact or situation, or abusing service guarantees.”

## METHODOLOGY

The main goal of the research was to investigate hospitality frontline employees' perspective on illegitimate customer complaints and find out how those same employees are coping with complaints that have no reasonable or factual basis. Meaning that for this study the sample was reduced to frontline employees who are currently working in the hotel industry for at least a year, who have direct and frequent contacts with customers and have first-hand experiences with illegitimate customer complaining behavior.

The questionnaire contained 13 questions which consisted of close ended, open ended and Likert scale questions. The questionnaire was written on both English and Croatian, but since the participants of the research were Croatian, the questionnaire was distributed in Croatian language. Once the questionnaire was ready it was piloted 2 times. Some small changes regarding order of questions and words were made afterwards.

The survey was distributed to 78 frontline employees of 6 hotels in Dubrovnik area. This population was chosen for the research because of their experiences with customer complaints on an almost daily basis. Being a frontline employee in hospitality industry means being frequently in direct contact with the customers and that increases the chance of encountering

illegitimate complaints. In order to reach as many frontline employees as possible the questionnaire was conducted in 6 luxury hotels in Dubrovnik area (Dubrovnik & Dubrovnik Riviera). The questionnaire was distributed in Hotel Kompas, Hilton Imperial, Hotel Excelsior, Sheraton Dubrovnik Riviera Hotel, Hotel Argentina and Hotel Croatia. The only requirement for distributing questionnaire was gaining the approval from the administration of the hotels. Distribution was allowed once the approval was gained. Gaining the approval and distributing the questionnaires was not an issue and it went without any major inconveniences. The participants were helpful and offered to answer to all the questions. Adriatic Luxury Hotels took 5 days to approve the distribution of the questionnaires. But once it was approved, everything went on smoothly.

There were 78 people (41 men and 37 women) who took part in the study. The age of the participants was not measured but the number of years that they have been working in the hospitality industry. The number of years working in the hospitality industry was one of the main factors because it showed how much experience a frontline employee has when dealing with illegitimate customer complaints. The longer the years of experience the bigger is the chance of encountering illegitimate customer complaints.

## RESULTS

Questionnaire had 13 questions and 78 responses in total. Two questions were close ended, meaning Yes/No questions, three questions were linear scale questions, meaning 1 - Strongly Disagree and 5 Strongly Agree, while other eleven questions were open ended questions, three of them being demographic questions. Each question has been analyzed and in depth analysis, median, average, standard deviation and percentages have been proposed.

First question was “How often do you get complaints from customers?” and there were 78 responses in total. The answers were ranging from 1- Almost Never to 5- Very Often. 3 (4%) participants stated that their answer to the question was almost never, 9 (12%) participants answered rarely, 19 (24%) answered sometimes, while 22 (28%) participants answered often and 25 (32%) answered very often. The average for this question was 3,73 and median was 4 meaning that half of the responses was below 4 and half was above. Standard deviation for this question was 1, 14.

Second question was “What percentage of these complaints do you think are illegitimate? For example, the customer is not telling the truth, or the complaint has no reasonable or factual basis” and there were 78 responses as well. None of the participants (0%) answered Less than 5 %, 15 (18%) answered 5-10 %, 13 (17%) answered 11-20%, while 18 (23%) of the participants answered 21-40%, 21 (28%) participants said 41-50% and 11 (14%) answered More than 50%. The average for this question was 4 and standard deviation was 1,33. Median was 4, meaning that half of the responses was below 4 and half was above.

Third question was “Why do you think customers file illegitimate complaints?” and there were 78 responses. 16 (20,51%) answered that they think the customer has unrealistic expectations, none of the participants answered that they think the customer is doing this because they want to harm the company, 52 (66,67%) answered that they think customers engage in such behavior because they want to get a discount, a refund or any kind of free service and 10 (12,82%) participants said that they think these customers are negative, unhappy people by nature. The average for this question was 2,71 and standard deviation was 0,93. Median for this question was 3.

Forth question wanted to investigate what customers mostly ask for when they file such complaints and it was stated as “When they complain dishonestly or without a good reason, customers mostly ask for.” The question had 78 responses. 44 (56,41%) participants answered

that the customers mostly ask for a discount or a refund, 23 (29,49%) participants answered that the customer mostly ask for a free service while 11 (14,10%) participants answered that the customer doesn't ask for anything specific. The average for this question was 1,57 and standard deviation was 0,73. Median for this question was 1.

Fifth question was "It is easy to tell when a customer has a real, legitimate complaint and when the complaint is false or made up" and the total number of the participants was 78. 2 (2,56%) of the participants answered Strongly Disagree, 6 (7,69%) Disagree, 8 (10,26%) are Neutral, 44 (56,41%) Agree and 18 (23,08%) Strongly Agree. The average for this question 3,89 and standard deviation was 0,93. Median was 4 meaning that half of the responses is below 4 and half of the responses is above 4.

Sixth question was "When you respond to a customer complaint that seems illegitimate, do you usually consult with your supervisor first, or do you make your own decision?" and the total number of responses was 78. 56 (71,80%) participants answered that they consult with their supervisor first and then act upon it, 14 (17,95%) participants answered they consult with their colleagues and act upon it, 8 (10,26%) participants act based on their own decision and don't consult with anyone while none of the participants consults with their supervisor but acts on their own. The average for this question was 1,38 and standard deviation was 0,66. Median for this question was 1 meaning that half or more than a half was 1 and other half was below 1.

Seventh question was "Thinking of all the illegitimate customer complaints that you have handled, how often does each of the following occur?" The question consisted of 4 statements each with their own Likert scale ranging from Never to Almost Always. The first statement was "The customer gets what he/she wanted, no questions asked" and the answers were: 0 (0%) Never, 9 (11,54%) Rarely, 19 (24,36%) Occasionally, 30 (38,46%) Frequently and 20 (25,64%) Almost Always. The average for this statement was 3,78 and standard deviation was



0,96. Median was 4. The second statement was “The customer got what he/she wanted after verifying the complaint” and the answers were: 0 (0%) Never, 5 (6,41%) Rarely, 29 (37,18%) Occasionally, 27 (34,62%) Frequently and 17 (21,80%) Almost Always. The average for this statement was 3,71 and standard deviation was 0,88. Median for this question was 4. The third statement was “The customer got some smaller compensation than they asked for” and the answers were: 16 (21%) were Never, 38 (48,72%) were Rarely, 14 (17,95%) were Occasionally, 10 (12,82%) were Frequently and none of the participants answered Almost Always. The average for this statement was 2,23 and standard deviation was 0,92. Median for this statement was 2. The fourth statement was “The customer did not get anything” and the results were: 37 (47,44%) were Never, 18 (23,08%) were Rarely, 14 (17,95%) were Occasionally, 9 (11,54%) were Frequently while none of the participants answered Almost Always. The average for this statement was 1,93 and standard deviation was 1,06. Median for this statement was 2.

Eight question was “Have you received training for handling such situations?” and all of the 78 participants answered with Yes. 100 % of the participants have received training for illegitimate customer behavior. The average for this question was 1, standard deviation was 0 and median was 1.

Ninth question was “Was the training you received useful and applicable to real situations that you faced?” and it was a follow up for the eight question. This question also got 100% concurrence. 78 out of 78 participants answered yes, that the training they received was useful. The average for this question was 1, standard deviation was 0 and median was 1.

Tenth question was “Which of the following best describes how you feel about illegitimate customer complaints?” and the total number of responses was 78. None (0%) of the participants answered that it makes them angry and that they take it personally, 27 (34,62%) answered that it makes them angry but they don’t take it personally, 24 (30,77%) answered

that it is a usual part of the job and that it doesn't affect them much, none of the participants answered that it makes them less motivated to do their job and 27 (34,62%) of the participants answered that it is fun and it makes their job more interesting and dynamic. The average for this question was 3,34 and standard deviation was 1,27. Median for this question was 3.

Following questions were demographic questions that served to categorize the participants and determine whether there are any correlations, differences or connection between those groups.

Eleventh question was gender question and it had 78 responses. 41 or 52,56 % of the participants were male while 37 or 47,44 % of the participants were female. The average for this question was 1,41 and standard deviation was 0,50. Median was 1.

Twelfth question was "How many years have you been working in the hospitality industry?" and out of the sample 25 participants or 32,02 % were in the industry for 1 to 5 years, 32 participants or 41,03% were in the industry for 6 to 10 years, 14 participants or 17,95% were in the industry for 11 to 20 years and 7 participants or 8,97% were in the hospitality industry for more than 20 years. The average for this question was 2.03 and standard deviation was 0.93. Median for this question was 2.

Thirteenth question was "What is your current job title?" and it had 78 responses in total. 41 or 52,56% of the participants are currently working as receptionists, 13 or 16,67% of the participants are guest relations representatives, 6 or 7,69 % of the participants are bellboys, 12 or 15,39% are waiters, 3 or 3,85 % are bartenders and 3 3,85% are working as a hostess. The average for this question was 2.12 and standard deviation was 1.48. Median for this question was 1.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to determine frontline employees' perspective on illegitimate customer complaining behavior. Based on these results it can be said that the trend of customer complaining is increasing and that customers file complaints on a daily basis. This finding connects with the one of Mendler (2019); in the current market with technology taking over it is easier than ever for customers to complain but it is also easier for them to take advantage of it and complain without the failure of a certain service. Not only that the customers are complaining but the majority of overall complaints are without any reasonable or factual basis. One of the results has proven that customers usually get what they want without many questions being asked, meaning that many hotels out of those involved in the research are still implementing the concept that the customer is always right which has to be taken with caution because it can easily backlash.

When it comes to the attitude of frontline employees being examined the results proposed an interesting outcome. It was surprising that many of the participants find coping with illegitimate customer complaints amusing. Primary hypothesis of the research was that the majority of the participants would be angry and annoyed by the illegitimate customer complaining behavior.

It was unexpected that all of the participants of this research had the same answer when it comes to the training for handling such behavior. One hundred percent of the examined sample had been trained and finds the training useful and effective. The result indicates that frontline employees of the hotels being examined are well prepared and qualified for handling illegitimate customer complaints and it is a practice that is encouraged and should definitely be continued.

The question that showed the lowest standard deviation (0.66) was the one that showed how examined employees do not and cannot make their decisions on their own but they seek for the advice and the approval of their supervisor.

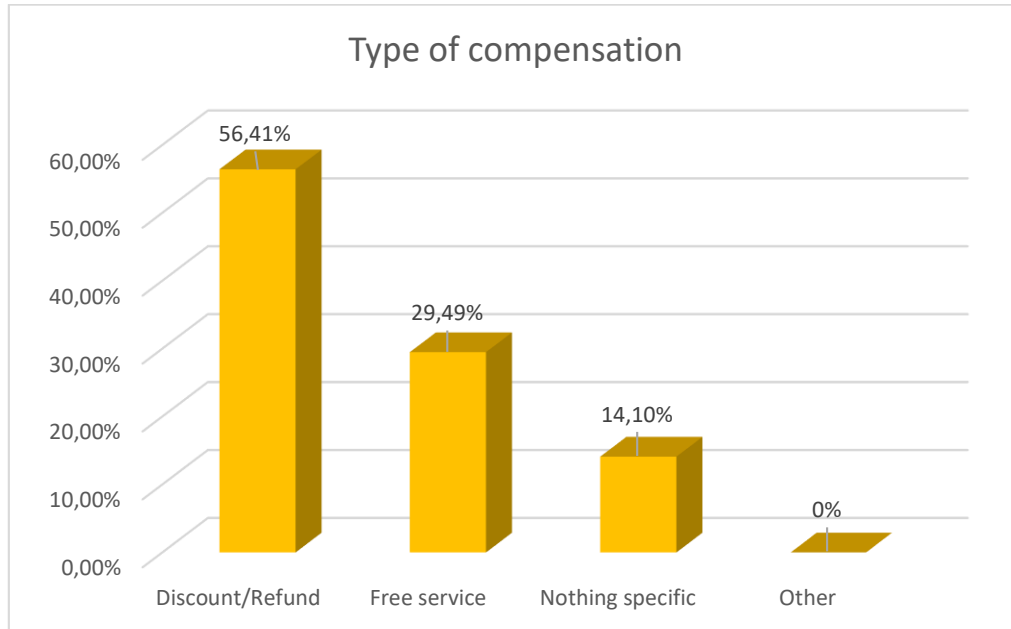
There are other interesting approaches for further research. For example, further research could focus also on restaurants in the area because they are the one who are also affected by illegitimate customer complaining behavior. When it comes to the bigger picture, it could be interesting to examine how various different cultures handle these incidents. Since the behavior, values and ethics vary between cultures, it is certain that there will be discrepancy between cultures.

There are several limitations to this research paper that should be recognized. In the first place, it was conducted only in Dubrovnik area and as such the results can be accurate only for that area. Secondly, it was a rather small sample of only 78 participants and as such it is not that credible as it could be with a larger sample and number of participants examined.

## APPENDIX

When they complain dishonestly or without a good reason, customers mostly ask for:

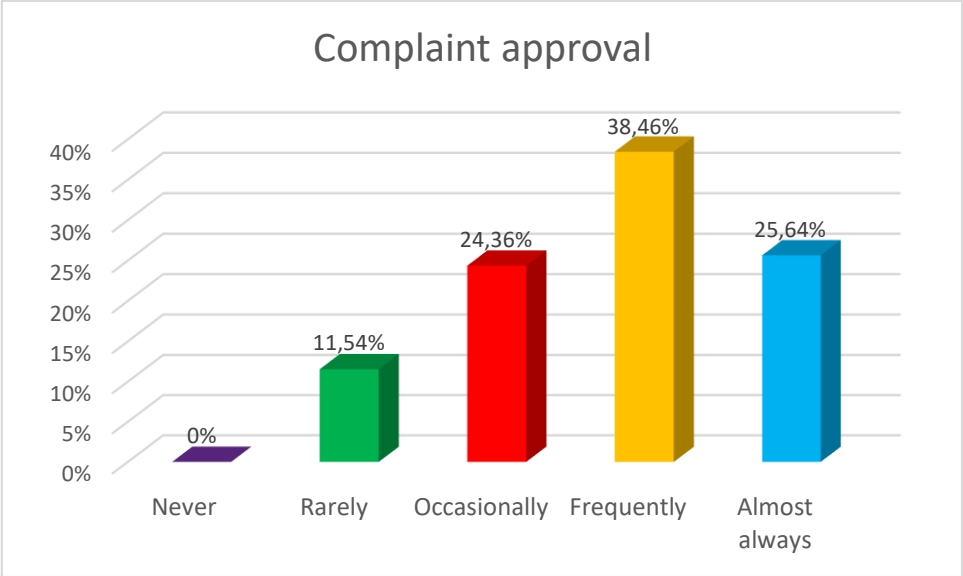
Total responses: 78



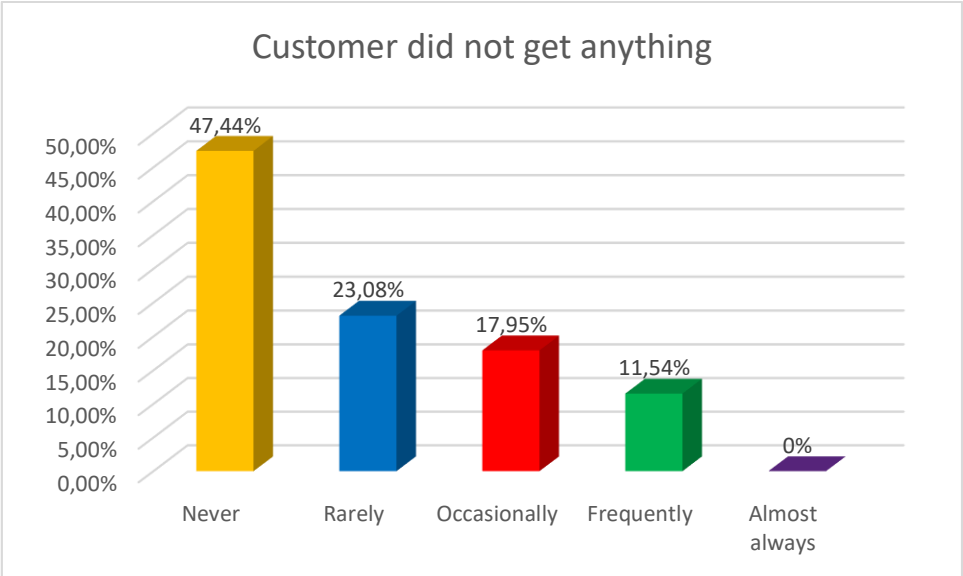
Thinking of all the illegitimate customer complaints that you have handled, how often does each of the following occur?

Total responses: 78

- The customer gets what he/she wanted, no questions asked

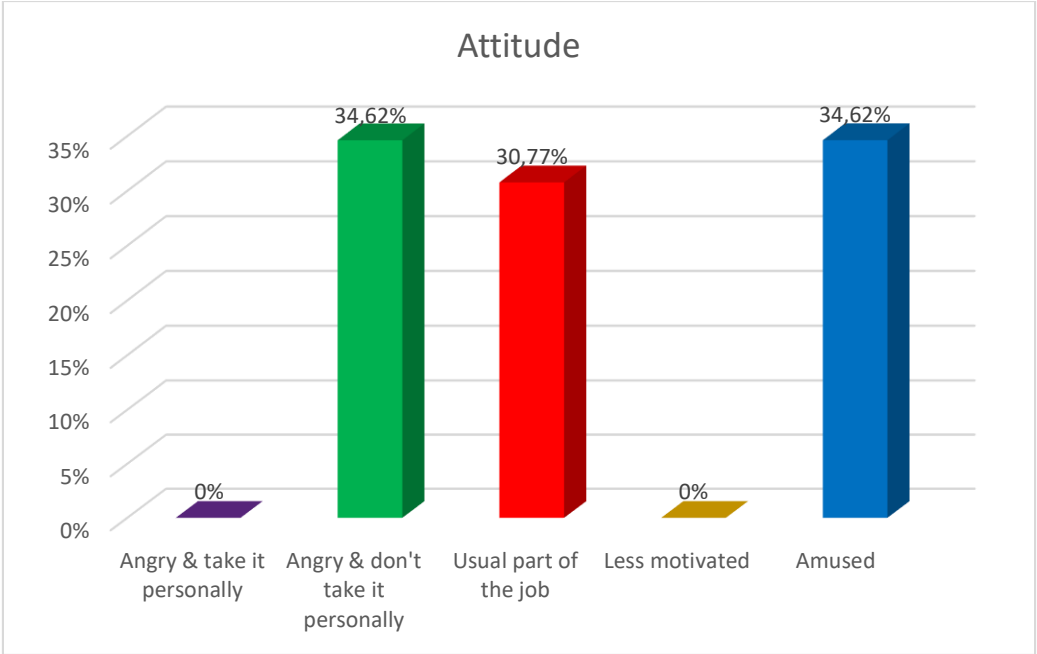


- The customer did not get anything



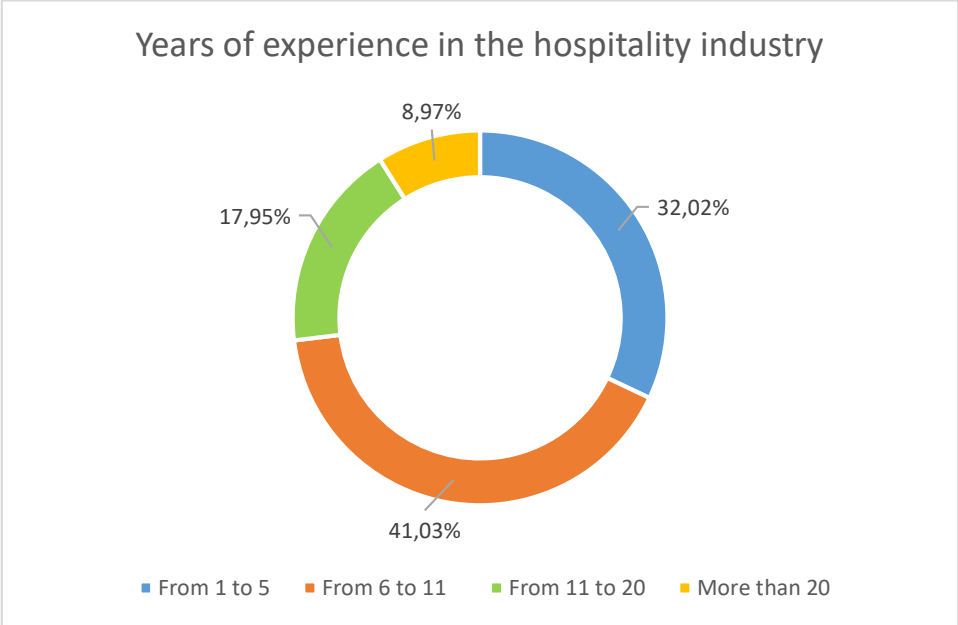
Which of the following best describes how you feel about illegitimate customer complaints?

Total responses: 78



How many years have you been working in the hospitality industry?

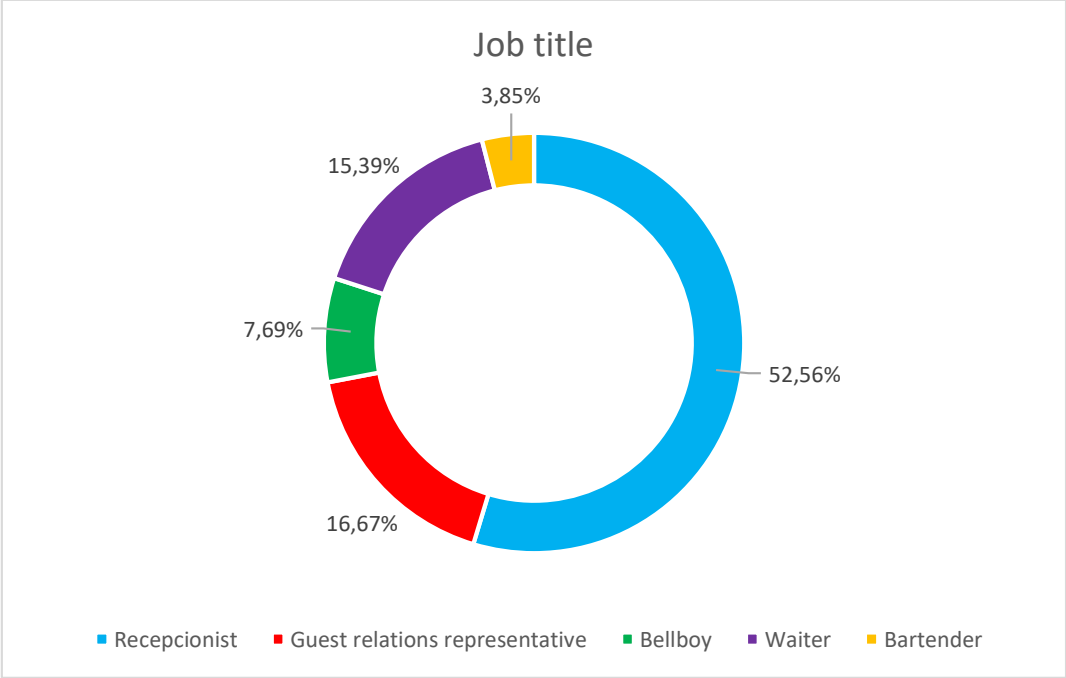
- From 1 to 5
- From 6 to 10
- From 11 to 20
- More than 20





What is your current job title?

- Receptionist
- Guest relations representative
- Bellboy
- Waiter
- Bartender
- Host/hostess



# Coping with customer complaints

## Questionnaire

Maria Miloslavić

1. How often do you get complaints from customers?
  - Almost never
  - Rarely
  - Sometimes/occasionally
  - Often
  - Very often
  
2. What percentage of these complaints do you think are illegitimate? For example, the customer is not telling the truth, or the complaint has no reasonable or factual basis.
  - Less than 5%
  - 5-10%
  - 11-20%
  - 21-40%
  - 41-50%
  - More than 50%
  
3. Why do you think customers file illegitimate complaints?
  - They have unrealistic expectations
  - They want to harm the company
  - They want to get a discount, a refund or any kind of free service
  - They are just negative, unhappy people by nature
  
4. When they complain dishonestly or without a good reason, customers mostly ask:
  - For a discount/refund
  - For a free service
  - For nothing specific
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

5. It is easy to tell when a customer has a real, legitimate complaint and when the complaint is false or made up.

Strongly disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

6. When you respond to a customer complaint that seems illegitimate, do you usually consult with your supervisor first, or do you make your own decision?

- Consult with my supervisor and then act upon it
- Consult with my colleagues and then act upon it
- Act based on my decision, did not consult with anyone
- Consult with my supervisor, but act on my own

7. Thinking of all the illegitimate customer complaints that you have handled, how often does each of the following occur?

- The customer gets what he/she wanted, no questions asked

Never    rarely    occasionally    frequently    almost always

- The customer got what he/she wanted after verifying the complaint

Never    rarely    occasionally    frequently    almost always

- The customer got some smaller compensation than they asked for

Never    rarely    occasionally    frequently    almost always

- The customer did not get anything

Never    rarely    occasionally    frequently    almost always

8. Have you received training for handling such situations?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

If YES then please answer the following question:

9. Was the training you received useful and applicable to real situations that you faced?

- Yes
- No

10. Which of the following best describes how you feel about illegitimate customer complaints?

- It makes me angry and annoyed
- It is just something that happens sometimes, a normal part of the business that doesn't affect me much
- It makes me less motivated to do my job
- It's amusing
- Other:\_\_\_\_\_

11. Gender:

- Male
- Female

12. How many years have you been working in the hospitality industry?

- From 1 to 5
- From 6 to 10
- From 11 to 20
- More than 20

13. What is your current job title?

- Receptionist
- Guest relations representative
- Bellboy
- Waiter
- Bartender
- Host/hostess
- Other:\_\_\_\_\_

Please add your own comment on this topic:

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