

**CONSUMER
SPECIAL**

BUYERS' REVENGE

BY JOSEPHINE BROUARD, SAM BOYKIN AND MICHELLE CROUCH

Adam Brimo was on hold for Vodafone customer service one Sunday in December last year when a thought hit him like a thunderbolt. *Let me do something useful*, the totally frustrated recent graduate from the University of New South Wales mused under his breath. *While I sit here waiting yet again...*

The 23-year-old could not have guessed the degree to which that impulse would reverberate. But the truth was he had reached his snapping point. For weeks the software engineering graduate had tried to get his

**MEET FOUR
FRUSTRATED
CUSTOMERS WHO
DIDN'T JUST GET
MAD —THEY GOT
CREATIVE**

mobile service provider to rectify its poor service. Dropped calls; poor reception; delayed text messages; you name it, he'd lived through it, and every time Brimo called Vodafone, he got the run-around.

So Brimo launched a website, *Vodafail.com*, in a desperate bid to find out if other people felt just as frustrated with the telco. "I set up a comments box called "Share your Pain" and within a week I had more than a thousand stories," he says.

Brimo used Facebook, Twitter and an internet technology discussion

PHOTO: TIM BAUER

Sydney's Adam Brimo voiced the frustration of thousands of mobile phone customers

forum, whirlpool.net.au, to alert fellow mobile phone users. The Vodafail website quickly went viral.

"I was working night and day just to keep up," says Brimo. "I introduced new features, including a reception map of Australia where fellow sufferers registered their postal code and level of mobile coverage. That was very popular."

Spurred by the vociferous support, Brimo contacted Australia's Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (tio.com.au) and by December 21 Vodafone had let him out of his 24-month contract.

All the fuss, further fuelled by a class action brought about by law firm Piper Alderman, forced Vodafone

Hutchison Australia's (VHA) chief executive officer, Nigel Dews, to issue an apology to customers on the company's website. "Having customers who are happy with their network experience is central to us, but unfortunately in recent weeks, some customers have had a disappointing and frustrating experience, which I am very sorry for," Dews wrote.

A week later, the telco chief called Brimo to suggest a face-to-face chat. Says Brimo, "I was exhausted after manning the website for days, but I went along. He wanted to know how he could help."

It was a case of "too little, too late" in Brimo's case as he had switched to another mobile network. But with

more than 12,000 Vodafail "pain" stories stockpiled in one month, he decided to compile a report and file it with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC).

"I crunched the data and essentially summarised what happened; why it happened; and what could have been done to prevent the debacle," Brimo says. "I didn't expect what happened to happen, and it wouldn't have happened if thousands of people hadn't shared their problems with me, and trusted me to do the right thing."

"So, for the sake of better customer service in the future, I felt my report could be useful to the ACCC."

VHA subsequently announced a \$500 million upgrade of its network and Dews promised to hire 300 additional staff to solve customer problems nationwide. "The company took on board quite a few of the recommendations I made to the ACCC, and I felt triumphant," says Brimo. "For a change, we customers won!"

So what's next for the proactive consumer? Says Brimo pragmatically, "It's time to move on!"

ANOTHER BLOODY ANGRY CUSTOMER

Petra Wennberg Cesario's Volvo was covered by a Volvo-sponsored extended service contract when the transmission failed a few years ago, after just over 96,000km. The local dealership in Pasadena, California, replaced the faulty transmission at no charge, but the car continued to slam into gear, rev and lurch. Wennberg

Following a nasty run-in with Volvo, Petra Wennberg Cesario called on her alter ego: Freya Svensson, Swedish goddess!



Cesario complained and took her car in for further repairs, but the dealership, Rusnak Volvo, was never able to solve the problem.

Three years later, Wennberg Cesario's service contract expired. "The dealership recommended I replace the transmission again," she says, "but this time, I would have to pay US\$3700 (\$3760). That was not acceptable." She contacted the office of the president of Volvo North America. She was told that was Volvo's best offer.

The 41-year-old mother of two did the next logical thing as far as she was concerned. Harking back to her Nordic roots, she created a sword-brandishing, Viking-hat-wearing Swedish goddess named Freya Svensson.

"FOR A CHANGE, WE CUSTOMERS WON"
Adam Brimo who took on a telco giant



PHOTO: TIM BAUER

PHOTO: LORI STOLL

In a series of tongue-in-cheek video blogs on her website, rusmackedvolvo.com, “Freya” lashed out at the car dealer. In one, she plucks a guitar while warbling in Swedish (with English subtitles), “O Volvo and Rusnak-aaaaaaak/ You gave me a broken transmission-ooooo-n/Now the love we once shared/ is fading in the past.”

Within ten days, more than 20,000 people viewed the video, including a Volvo executive who phoned Cesario and told her the company was “committed to getting to the bottom of the problem”.

After examining the car and finding multiple problems, Volvo agreed to cover repairs to the cost of \$9000.

“This was not about some vendetta,” Cesario insists. “I was just documenting the fact that I wasn’t being treated right. I never dreamed it would become this big, but it feels good to be a voice for the little guy.”

ACHY BREAKY HURT

Musician Dave Carroll was waiting to disembark from a flight in Chicago when he heard another passenger say something about what was happening out on the tarmac: “Oh, my God, they’re throwing guitars!” One of those guitars was the musician’s beloved Taylor 710 acoustic/electric, worth around \$3500, which suffered a broken base. When he contacted United Airlines requesting compensation, he was shunted from one person to another, each one claiming another party was responsible. After nine futile months, the airline told him it wasn’t responsible for the damage. And soon all contact ended.

It was not the end as far as Carroll was concerned. Knowing that conflict is at the core of all good theatre, he filmed a music video called “United Breaks Guitars”. Over images of actors portraying clumsy baggage handlers,

a busted guitar on the tarmac surrounded by a crime-scene chalk outline, and a tearful wake for the dearly departed Taylor 710, Carroll sang “You broke it, you should fix it/You’re liable, just admit it/I should’ve flown with someone else/Or gone by car/’Cause United breaks guitars.”

Within days, more than a million people had viewed the video on YouTube, and the story caught fire with the media. The airline changed its tune after Carroll’s video went viral. While it refused to apologise or take responsibility, the airline did offer \$US1200

in cash and \$US1200 in flight vouchers. Carroll turned them down. “I said, ‘Talk of compensation ended when you closed the door on me.’” The incident has given Carroll’s musical career a boost. Best of all, Taylor Guitars invited him to its factory and handed him two brand-new guitars. Says Carroll, “It pays to stand up for yourself.”

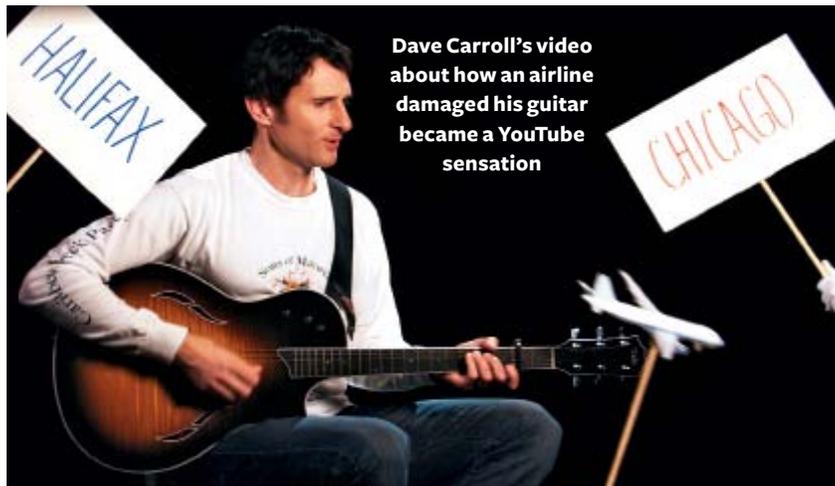
BOUQUETS AND BRICKBATS

As Dave Clarke was finalising his purchase online at the floral and gift retailer 1-800-Flowers, he clicked on a link offering a discount on his

Dave Clarke’s Twitter rants about a marketing ploy on an online florist got the company’s attention



GOT A CONSUMER RAGE STORY? Tell us at readersdigest.com.au/contribute



Dave Carroll’s video about how an airline damaged his guitar became a YouTube sensation

PHOTOS: (CARROLL) CURVE PRODUCTIONS, INC.; (CLARKE) BILL CRAMER/WONDERFUL MACHINE

NOW, HERE'S HOW TO WRITE A COMPLAINT LETTER...

If you're not the internet-savvy or Viking-helmet-wearing type, take a page from author Mark Twain. In 1905, the author penned this ire-filled missive to J. H. Todd after the salesman sent him a pitch for some bogus medicine. The Elixir of Life was said to cure meningitis and diphtheria, ailments that killed Twain's daughter and son.

Dear Sir, Your letter is an insoluble puzzle to me. The handwriting is good & exhibits considerable character, yet the letter & the accompanying advertisements profess to be the work of the same hand. The person who wrote the advertisements is without doubt the most ignorant person now alive on the planet; also without doubt he is an idiot, an idiot of the 33rd degree, & scion of an ancestral procession of idiots stretching back to the missing link. It puzzles me to make out how the same hand could have constructed your letter & your advertisements. Puzzles fret me, puzzles annoy me, puzzles exasperate me; & always, for a moment, they arouse in me an unkind state of mind toward the person who has puzzled me. A few moments from now my resentment will have faded & passed & I shall probably even be praying for you; but while there is yet time I hasten to wish that you may take a dose of your own poison by mistake, & enter swiftly into the damnation which you & all other patent medicine assassins have so remorselessly earned. Adieu, adieu, adieu! **Mark Twain**

TLG had charged him \$11.99. In fact, TLG had been charging him each month since he'd pursued the discount offer, and now he was out over \$150.

"I'm pretty tech-savvy," says Clarke, an internet consultant. "I'm on the web all day – it's what I do – and I still got tricked into this."

He's not alone. TLG has been sued multiple times and has been the target of thousands of consumer complaints.

Clarke spent the rest of the day caught in a hellish black hole of customer-service phone trees. The best TLG would do was reimburse him for two months' worth of charges. "That really didn't cut it for me," Clarke says.

Clarke vented his frustrations on Twitter; he outlined what happened to him and immediately heard from others in the same situation. Moreover, many people "retweeted" his message, spreading Clarke's online rant exponentially.

Within hours, a 1-800-Flowers representative responded to Clarke's tweet, asking how he could help. Clarke laid out his case and the company arranged a total refund. Better yet, 1-800-Flowers no longer offers the program online.

"It's social-media activism at its best," Clarke says. ■

Do you have a tried and true method for getting good customer service? Tell us at readersdigest.com.au/contribute