

THE CONSUMER LOOKS AT REPAIR SERVICES

Erie L. Lund, Merchandise Division of the Better Business Bureau
of St. Louis, Missouri

A typical case for the Merchandise Division of the Better Business Bureau might start with a call from a housewife about a repair made to her washing machine. She complains that the machine had broken down again the day after the repair had been made. Then we go through the process of getting the whole story. We check to see that he is an honest and reputable workman. Then we try to have him do the job over or get the necessary work done. First, we get the story from the complainer. Then we get the story from the businessman. Finally we try to help the businessman to get the customer's goodwill. Very often a complaint is not justified and then the Bureau can render a real service to the business by explaining that to the customer.

Study of TV Repair Service

We studied the problem of TV repair last summer and prepared a bulletin on that subject entitled "What Prize TV Repairs." This was done because of the large number of complaints about poor work and alleged overcharges. We bought four brand new TV sets from a reputable distributor. Then we hired an electrical engineer to prepare the sets for shopping. He saw that they were all in perfect working order. Then we brought the sets into the home of the shopper and called for a service man. In case No. 1, the bill should have been about \$8; the bill was for \$22--it needed a picture tube booster. In case No. 2, \$47.36 was paid to have the set repaired; it could have been done for \$7.50--including a tube for \$2.45 and the service call charge. What good does it do? People are alerted to a bad situation in T.V. service and often call about a company before they do business with them. Businessmen said it was unfair to the whole industry in publishing this thing. Some activities are sponsored by the TV repair industry such as examinations and licensing fees for TV repairmen.

Repair Service on Automobiles

An investigation of motor exchange companies began about a year ago. We had a lot of complaints from the public on these companies. There were five companies in St. Louis offering motor overhauls from \$29.50 to \$69.50. This advertising was directed toward consumers who had older cars. After bringing in his car for the overhaul the customer was told that the motor was in too bad a shape for an overhaul--that what he really needed was an exchange motor. The price was often quoted at about \$169. Then after authorizing the exchange and being informed that the car was ready the customer was astounded to receive a bill for three or four hundred dollars for this service. If they had done a good job, it would have been different. But the work was sloppily done and parts charged for were not even installed. The jobs did not last. There was difficulty in getting service under the guarantees. If the customer protested about the price or the condition of the car, he was cursed and abused. The Better Business Bureau presented the facts to the newspapers, the TV stations and the radio stations. The media threw out the advertising of the companies. Firms cannot exist without advertising. That is the life of the business. That brought about an immediate and drastic change in the attitudes and practices of the companies involved. There has since been a marked reduction in the number of complaints about these organizations.

What can One do to Protect Himself?

Here are some suggestions:

1. Know your repairman.
2. Have a written estimate beforehand with the understanding that the work will not be completed without your approval should it cost higher than the estimate.
3. If you buy an item such as a refrigerator and have it delivered to your home, check the merchandise before accepting delivery. See that it is the merchandise that was ordered and that it is in working condition. If the housewife does check and finds something wrong, she should insist that the merchandise be taken back instead of accepting a promise that the manager of the store will be notified later to get something done about it.
4. A guarantee is only as good as the company or individual giving it, no matter how elaborate the guarantee. If a written guarantee is involved, the guarantee should be specific as to what it covers and for how long.

How the Better Business Bureau Can Help You

If you live in a bureau city, use the BBB. Use the inquiry service. Call and find out about a company before you do business with them. On TV repairs contact the distributor of the particular brand and ask them whom they would recommend to have repair the TV set. If you still are not satisfied, call the Better Business Bureau and check with them. Reputable repairmen are in the majority.

Why do People Complain About Businesses?

1. People sign contracts without reading or understanding them.
2. Purchasers rely on firms reputations and guarantees.
3. Buyers sign blank contracts without written proof of agreement.
4. People believe they have retained the right to return merchandise if not satisfied.
5. Customers fail to investigate and permit themselves to be rushed into a fast deal.
6. Shoppers fail to investigate the practices of a concern before dealing with it.
7. Buyers fail to recognize the fact that they cannot get something for nothing.
8. People will buy a gimmick instead of a good product in making a purchase.
9. Customers fail to obtain written guarantees when purchasing repair services and merchandise.
10. The public is often misled by a few dishonest businessmen.

We have had no successful suits brought against us by businessmen in our forty years of operation. We believe that "truth is the best defense against slander." Why not take full advantage of what we have to offer toward consumer protection?