

CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

A customer complaint is “an expression of dissatisfaction of a product or service on a consumer’s behalf to a responsible party”. In the world of food this dissatisfaction could also be an illness or injury to the consumer.

A complaint can be received from many sources:

- customer e.g. further processor, retailer, butcher shop, consumer
- regulatory agency e.g. Public Health, CFIA, OMAFRA
- returned product (often overlooked)

Although the source of the complaint is different they are all telling you the same thing – the service or product that you have provided to your customer or consumer has caused a negative reaction.

If at all possible, have one person be the gatekeeper for all complaints and this will make the process easier and more consistent.

Information

In order to effectively investigate the complaint it is essential that you get as much information from the complainant as possible.

- Listen carefully
- Be empathic
- Avoid passing judgment
- Avoid making hasty and premature conclusions
- Explain that an investigation will begin and they will be contacted with findings
- Apologize and provide a refund or replacement product if applicable - it’s okay to apologize!

Using a standardized report form take down all of the relevant information from the customer. This should include:

1. Customer details e.g. name, address, phone number, email
2. Product details e.g. product name, lot code, best before or production date, date of purchase or receipt, location of purchase, amount affected, amount remaining.
3. Nature of the complaint e.g. packaging compromised, labelling error, off condition, foreign material, allergic reaction, illness or injury.

4. If the complaint is an illness ensure that you get:

- When was the product consumed
- Amount of product consumed
- Number of persons consuming the product / number of persons ill
- Names and ages of persons ill
- Date and time persons became ill
- Symptoms of illness in order of occurrence
- Has a medical professional been consulted
- Is there a doctors report
- Current status of illness
- Any follow-up required

5. If the complaint is an injury ensure that you get:

- Nature of injury
- Current status of injury
- Has a medical professional been consulted?
- Any follow-up required?

If the complaint is a foreign material complaint, have the object sent back to you or have someone pick it up. If they are not willing to send the object, have them take a picture, alongside a ruler or with another form of measurement so you have a good understanding of the dimensions of the object.

Investigation

Once you have the information from the customer you can start your internal investigation.

Records are the key to a thorough and effective complaint investigation, no matter what the complaint is about. The lot code, best before or production date given to you by your customer should lead you to the production date of the product in question. Once you have that date, pull all associated records for that day. These records may include the following:

- Pre-operational sanitation record
- Sanitation checklist
- Preventative maintenance records
- Production records
- Customer complaint file (this will show if it is an isolated incidence or bigger issue)
- Any micro results
- Distribution records

There are a few methods that could be used to investigate a customer complaint however one of the most useful tools is ‘Root Cause Analysis’.

Root Cause Analysis

Step One: Define the Problem

Step Two: Collect Data

Step Three: Identify Possible Causal Factors

Step Four: Identify the Root Cause(s)

Use the same tools you used to identify the causal factors (in Step Three) to look at the roots of each factor. These tools are designed to encourage you to dig deeper at each level of cause and effect.

Step Five: Recommend and Implement Solutions

Could the problem affect other products?

Throughout the process, consider any products that may have been affected by the same circumstances that caused the initial complaint. These may include products that were made on the same line, in the same lot, on the same day, or with the same ingredients. Once identified and if they are still in your control, these products should be identified, held and inspected and brought back into compliance. If the problem identified has affected the safety of products that are in the marketplace you will need to notify the applicable regulatory authorities.

Communication of Findings

Depending on who you are reporting back to it may determine the amount of information that is shared from your root cause analysis.

A customer such as a major retailer or regulatory agencies will be looking for the details. They want to know exactly what happened, how it happened and what you are going to do to prevent it from happening again.

A consumer may not want the nitty gritty details of how a piece of metal ended up in the product that they consumed, they just want to have the plant own up to it, apologize, and compensate if required.

Records

Documentation is key to managing a complaint:

- Keep copies of all production records associated with the complaint
- Include recent inspections
- Document every conversation, action or note regarding the complaint
- Document the results of the investigation and any corrective and preventative actions that were taken
- Store everything in one file

Files should be kept for every complaint for a minimum of three years

For more information, resources, or help with your program please contact:

Daphne, OIMP Technical Director
(519) 763-4558 Ext 222 or
technical@oimp.ca

