

Sunday, June 24, 2001

There's help for consumer problems; file a complaint

SHOP TALK



NICOLE STAFFORD

I want to thank all the readers who wrote and e-mailed their thoughts on my skirmish with terrible customer service.

After over a year's worth of battling with the furniture company that sent me a damaged couch, I now refer to the experience as the couch saga.

I'm happy to report the couch was picked up in the evening at my convenience during the last week of May.

Still, I'm certain the couch saga won't be my last encounter with poor customer service.

I say that for two reasons: your letters and the epilogue to my story.

Yes, yes, there's one last insult to injury to report.

But first I'd like to address some of your comments. Many of you said you'd like to know the name of the furniture company and couldn't understand why I wouldn't reveal it in the newspaper.

I'd love to tell you. And, make no mistake, I'm telling everybody I know personally. But as a reporter, I must be fair.

It's not fair to reveal the name of the company in connection with my personal experience alone.

Do a bit of research

I will say this: It's a good idea to familiarize yourself with any company before making a major purchase. Ask friends, co-workers, family and acquaintances for recommendations.

If you're without leads from people you know, do some research. Call the Michigan Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division and ask them whether the company has had complaints filed against them. Ask them how many and then request the number of complaints filed against their major competitors.

Here's another good idea courtesy of a reader who responded to my last column, Visit Planet Feedback, a consumer complaint web site located at www.planetfeedback.com.

The site enables users to read complaints posted by angry and dissatisfied consumers. Users can also send a letter of complaint to Planet Feedback. According to the reader who wrote to me about the site, results were "almost instant."

How to file a complaint

Many responding readers asked that I reprint information about the Consumer Protection Division and how to file a formal complaint with the department.

And, based on my own experience, I strongly recommend doing that, if you're unable to resolve the problem by working with the store or retailer on your own.

The department's employees were not only helpful and pleasant but downright encouraging. Once more, my complaint resulted in an apologetic phone call from a corporate manager and the promise of a full refund on my couch.

You can reach the Consumer Protection Division and retrieve useful information either on the phone or on the Internet.

If you're looking to discuss your problem, obtain advice and review your options, call them at (517) 373-1140 or toll-free at (877) 765-8388. If you're going to file a complaint, request that a form be sent, unless you'd prefer to obtain it on-line.

The Michigan Attorney General's web address is www.state.mi.us. Go to the link "File a Complaint" on the left side of the page. You can download a complaint form to send by mail or file one on-line.

There's also a link to information from the consumer protection division.

More to the story

Now, are you ready for my epilogue? It's a real slap in the face.

Well, a week or two after my couch was taken away (by an independent delivery company), I received a certified mail notice.

And, yes, it was a letter from my favorite furniture retailer.

Was it an apology? Was it a cashier's check for my troubles and lost time? Or was it just a notice that the couch had been received?

No, it was none of the above. It was a letter threatening legal action if I failed to return the cash receipt I had received. I had been refunded, due to my inability to comply with the company's attempts to pick up the couch.

Clothing horses hunting

Local shoppers get on a bus for all-day tour of local resale shops



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLINSKY

Checking out the goods: Kathi Bradley of Clawson takes an interest in the blouses and jackets at Bellocchio Upsale Resale on Woodward Avenue in Royal Oak. Bellocchio is one of the last stops on the resale shopping spree.

BY NICOLE STAFFORD
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Two jumbo buses rev up in a run-of-the-mill parking lot in front of Nicole's Revival Designer Resale Clothier on Newburgh Road in Westland.

It's an unlikely sight at 9 a.m. on a Friday, especially since, rather than kids on their way to Cedar Point, there are women outside the tour buses.

A bona fide load of them, giving off a kind of twitchy energy that only women can.

The ladies form lines, winding impatient snakes away from each bus. One or two men are in the mix, most men would surely admit they're ill-equipped to co-exist with the particular brand of female energy at work here.

These ladies, about 75 of them, are going hunting. Hunting for bargains on an all-day bus tour of Detroit area resale shops.

"We're here to get bargains at fantastic costs. We're here to get bargains with very little money changing hands," says Louise Warnke of Clinton Township who came on the tour in search of tailored suits at bottom-of-the-barrel prices. Warnke joins her sister, Katherine Moran of Grasse Pointe Shores, and friends Mollene Levin and Adrienne Gendelman, both from West Bloomfield.

While all four women have different tastes and reasons for going on the tour, one sentiment unites them, indeed, all the shoppers: the thrill of the hunt and the glory of a bargain.

"You're beating the rap," says Warnke. "I'm not making Lord & Taylor rich, I'm making myself rich!"



STAFF PHOTO BY HEATHER BONTING

Ready, set, go: Nicole Christ (left), a resale shop owner and the tour's organizer, along with helpers Dominique Battle of Westland (center) and Tuylia Roper of Detroit, prepare a bus load of bargain hunters for a one-day resale shopping tour across metropolitan Detroit.

With the cost of women's wear reaching new heights and reasonably priced classic apparel getting more difficult to find every day, many women consider resale the best way to get the wardrobe they want.

Nicole Christ, owner of Nicole's Revival and an avid resale shopper herself, organized the more than 150-mile bus tour with stops in DeWitt near Lansing, Milford, Keego Harbor, Royal Oak and Livonia.

Christ, who opened Nicole's Revival in 1994, has hosted dozens of tours, including one in Europe. Currently, she's planning a tour in Chicago for November and another in Europe for fall 2002. She's also waiting to hear from the Oprah Winfrey Show. Producers are interested in having her be a guest.

"This is just really happening," says Christ of the tours and the search for recycled, bargain merchandise. "It's the thrill of the hunt kind of thing."

As the tour progresses, shoppers enjoy a bag lunch, swap resale stories, compete for prizes and talk about their favorite retailers, as treasures — bought dirt cheap — slowly and surely pile up in the bus.

A Louis Feraud summer tweed jacket for \$2. A full-length mohair coat with sash for \$16. A yellow quilted, two-piece suit from Neiman Marcus for just over \$9.

"I don't necessarily think women like to resale shop. They just like to shop and they like the resale shop environment," says Warnke, admitting today's ambitious quest for bargains borders on insanity. "Originally when we were cave-men, we went out gathering wood. Maybe this is a throwback to that. We like to find things, hunt, gather. Maybe it fills a primitive need."

ADDED ATTRACTIONS

Retail, style and special store events are listed in this calendar. Please send information to: Malls & Mainstreets, c/o Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. By fax, (248) 644-1314. E-mail, nstafford@oc.hometown.net. Deadline for publication is two weeks in advance.

SUNDAY, JUNE 24

SHOPPING SPREE GIVEAWAY

Great Lakes Crossing in Auburn Hills is giving away \$1,000 in gift certificates each week for the next five weeks. To enter, register for the shopping center's weekly e-bulletin service. The site is located at www.shopgreatlakescrossing.com.

VERA WANG TRUNK SHOW

Gals at the Orchard Mall in West Bloomfield hosts a trunk show of Vera Wang's collection for bridesmaids, noon-5 p.m. For additional information, please call (248) 851-1260.

HOME & GARDEN SHOW

The last day to view the Somerset Collection's Home & Garden Show 2001, North Grand Court. The display features a two-story Italian-style home facade and a 6,000-square-foot garden. For more details, call (248) 643-9390.

MALL SIDEWALK SALE

The last day to attend Livonia Mall's sidewalk sale

MONDAY, JUNE 25

FOCUS ON ST. JOHN

Saks Fifth Avenue, the Somerset Collection in Troy, hosts a St. John Focus Week. St. John Boutique, second floor. Please call (248) 643-9000 ext. 491 for details.

TUESDAY, JUNE 26

LES COPAINS PREVIEW

View Les Copains fall 2001 collection at Saks Fifth Avenue, the Somerset Collection in Troy, through June 27. Les Copains Boutique, second floor. A company representative will be available to assist customers. For more information, call (248) 614-3301.

SATURDAY, JULY 7

BARGAIN FEST

Livonia Mall, located at Seven Mile and Middlebelt roads, hosts Bargain Fest, an indoor garage sale, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Tables are currently available for rent, and the general public is invited to participate. For additional information, call (248) 476-1160.

MONDAY, JULY 16

YEOHLEE TRUNK SHOW

Lynn Portnoy Women's Clothier, 29260 Franklin Road at Northwestern Highway in Southfield, showcases a clothing collection by Yeehlee through Tuesday, July 17. For additional information, please call (248) 353-2900.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 10

FASH BASH

Marshall Field's presentation of the Founders Junior Council of the Detroit Institute of the Arts Fashion Show will be held at the Fox Theatre in Detroit. Tickets cost \$35-\$300 and can be purchased at the Fox Theatre box office, call (313) 983-6611, or at Ticketmaster locations, call (248) 645-6666.