

# FROM COMPLAINT TO RESOLUTION: A CASE OF A LARGE GLOBAL ACTOR – COMPANY X

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This case study examines how Company X, a large international B2B organisation, handles customer complaints through a tiered support structure and cross-department coordination. While most complaints are ultimately resolved, case evidence suggests that outcomes are strongly influenced by the time to resolution. Using a portfolio of 50 complaint cases, service-level time standards, and post-case customer feedback, students are asked to diagnose where and why cases stall. The case highlights a managerial decision: which important lever the support team should prioritise first to reduce resolution time and protect customer satisfaction: enhancing intake quality and routing, standardising workflow execution and ownership rules across tiers, or strengthening customer communication and expectation management during delays. The case is suitable for undergraduate and graduate courses in services marketing, consumer behaviour, and customer experience, and it supports discussion of service recovery, fairness perceptions, cross-departmental coordination, and performance measurement.

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# OD PRITOŽBE DO REŠITVE: PRIMER VELIKEGA GLOBALNEGA AKTERJA – PODJETJA X

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Študija primera obravnava obrnavo pritožb odjemalcev v podjetju X, velikem mednarodnem podjetju, preko večnivojske strukture za podporo strankam in preko medoddelčne koordinacije. Čeprav je večina pritožb na koncu rešenih, primer prikazuje, da so rezultati močno odvisni od časa, potrebnega za reševanje. Na podlagi nabora 50 primerov pritožb, internih časovnih standardov in povratnih informacij odjemalcev po zaključku primera morajo študenti diagnosticirati, kje in zakaj primeri zastajajo. Primer izpostavlja vodstveno odločitev: kateri ključni vzvod naj služba za podporo strankam prioritetizira, da bi skrajšala čas reševanja in ohranila zadovoljstvo odjemalcev – izboljšanje kakovosti sprejema in usmerjanja primerov, standardizacijo izvedbe delovnih tokov in pravil lastništva primerov med ravnmi podpore strankam ali krepitev komunikacije z odjemalci in upravljanje njihovih pričakovanj v primeru zamud. Študija primera je primerna za dodiplomske in podiplomske predmete s področja marketinga storitev, vedenja odjemalcev in izkušnje odjemalcev ter podpira razpravo o odpravi storitvenih napak, zaznani pravičnosti, medoddelčni komunikaciji in merjenju uspešnosti.



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## **1 Literature Review**

Customer complaints are a common occurrence in contemporary marketing exchanges. They constitute a specific type of consumer post-purchase behaviour, whose role and meaning in relation to consumer-organisation relationships have changed significantly over time. In the past, complaints were viewed as detrimental to organisations and something that should be avoided at almost all costs. Nowadays, however, marketing experts and professionals agree that complaints are a valuable source of information for improving business processes and for maintaining and increasing customer satisfaction (Min et al., 2019). Consequently, successful customer complaint handling is one of the most significant aspects of consumer relationship management, as it contributes to customer loyalty and business performance (Umashankar et al., 2017; Ye et al., 2011), particularly in organisational markets (B2B).

### **1.1 Complaint-handling in B2B markets and customer satisfaction**

Relationships in B2B markets are typically long-term, involve multiple contacts, and require deeper involvement from both parties (Kuster-Boluda et al., 2020; Sands et al., 2022). Losing one client due to a mishandled complaint can have serious consequences for the company, and the impact of complaint handling on B2B relationships is far more direct than in B2C markets (Álvarez et al., 2010). B2B failures can disrupt supply chains (Sands et al., 2022) and trigger not only switching but also reputational damage within the industry (Küster et al., 2024). Finally, B2B marketing is heavily relationship-based, and complaint handling is a core relationship marketing tool that affects satisfaction, trust, and loyalty (Álvarez et al., 2010).

When complaint handling is slow or even fails, it usually leads to dissatisfaction. Expectation-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1997) states that (dis)satisfaction is a function of (un)met customer expectations. As in every other business encounter, customers also develop expectations about how they and their complaints should be treated during the complaint-handling process. Studies show that common customer expectations in this context include quick action and timeliness with no delays (Gruber et al., 2010), easy access to channels and clear procedures (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Kuster-Boluda et al., 2020), workable solutions with appropriate compensation (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Kumari et al., 2021), as well as some

evidence of a company learning from complaints and improving quality and reliability over time (Filip, 2013; Gruber et al., 2010). While this may seem like a lot of requirements, if a company underperforms on these and fails to meet customers' expectations, it will often result in a client, who, on top of being dissatisfied with the performance of the product or service that was the cause of complaint, is now experiencing growing dissatisfaction due to subpar complaint handling. Additionally, these failures may lead to intense negative feelings (Harrison-Walker, 2019; Hien et al., 2024; Valentini et al., 2020), which get even more pronounced if the customer perceives the "faulty" provider as in control of the situation (Akarsu et al., 2023).

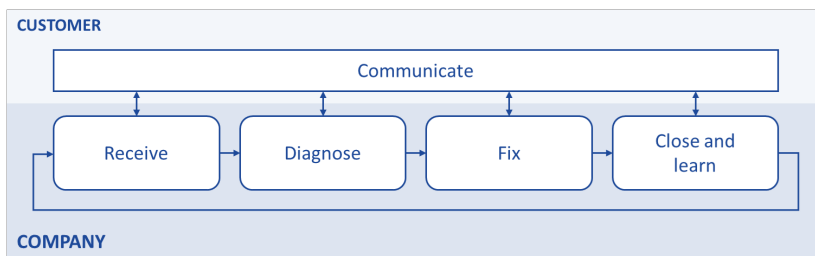
Another noteworthy factor in determining customers' (dis)satisfaction with complaint handling is perceived fairness. Perceived fairness entails three dimensions – distributive, procedural and interactional fairness, which contribute to the evaluation of complaint handling and its outcomes. Distributive fairness concerns whether the outcomes and their distribution are seen as equitable, equal, and/or need-based (Chung & Petrick, 2015; Walster et al., 1978). This is usually the strongest driver of satisfaction with complaint handling (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Sari et al., 2025). In this context, the comparison between what was lost (the reason for the complaint) and what was gained (the compensation) is highly evident and direct, thereby facilitating an evaluation of fairness. The second dimension, procedural fairness, is assessed by the procedures used to determine outcomes and their distribution (Aryee et al., 2002; Gilovich et al., 2005). Customers expect these procedures to be fair, clear, transparent, and timely. It is usually viewed as the weakest predictor of satisfaction, although this can also change, particularly when procedures are salient or clearly (un)fair (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002; Orsingher et al., 2010). Finally, interactional fairness, which concerns the nature of communication and interpersonal treatment (respect, empathy, apologies, explanations), is also integral to customers as it represents a primary link between perceived fairness and affective processing (Chung & Petrick, 2015; Finkel, 2001; Xia et al., 2004). Studies also show that, contrary to the distributive and procedural fairness, the interactional fairness plays a role beyond a single encounter/transaction and immediate (dis)satisfaction, affecting long-term loyalty and relationship quality (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002).

Perceived fairness in complaint handling can also serve as a mitigating factor in cases where complaint resolution appears slow or even messy. When resolution is delayed but transparent and justified, this can increase perceived procedural fairness and, consequently, drive satisfaction with complaint handling (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Similarly, empathetic and effortful communication, and the sheer feeling of being informed and treated well, can also offset the frustration of slow progress (Baron et al., 2005; Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Karatepe, 2006). Lastly, through additional compensation or upgraded service, customers can reinterpret unexpected delays and/or hassles as a fair trade-off, thereby increasing perceived distributive fairness (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Orsingher et al., 2010; Sari et al., 2025).

### 1.2.1 Complaint handling process

As described above, complaint handling and recovery are not just about “fixing the issue,” but also about providing the customer with a satisfactory experience in the due process (and even beyond). Here, we present an integrated framework for designing better complaint handling.

An efficient and practical complaint handling process is structured and managed as a customer experience (Stauss et al., 2004; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). Figure 1 presents the foundational steps.



**Figure 1: An integrated framework of complaint handling**

Source: (Own).

The process begins with an actual customer complaint (Receive). Filing a complaint with the company should be encouraged, easy, and accessible through multiple channels. Front-line staff should be trained to welcome complaints as input, not as

threats (Tax & Brown, 1998; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). After receiving the complaint, the second step (Diagnose) is to determine what actually went wrong and why (in this case, in the specific incident, and in the process as a whole). At this stage, several questions should be raised and addressed: the type of failure, the severity of the incident, the customer's position (experience and expectations), etc. It's absolutely paramount to gather all relevant information to understand the issue and its context before acting (Orsingher et al., 2010; Valentini et al., 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). The next step, while focused on actual complaint settlement and resolution (fix), still represents a combination of restorative elements tailored to the complaint cause: an apology, urgent reinstatement, empathy from the staff, compensation, follow-up; with all facets of service recovery fairness accounted for (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Jung & Seock, 2017). Finally, the last step (Close and learn) relates to an in-house learning process through "evaluation, communication and use of the complaints." The issue here is two-fold: primarily, how to prevent it from happening again, and secondly, how to recover better if it does. This stage usually requires a system for logging, classifying, and analysing complaints, feeding insights into process and product improvements, staff training, and modifications to complaint-handling policies (Michel et al., 2009; Tax & Brown, 1998; Van Vaerenbergh & Orsingher, 2016). Additionally, the process should be transparent and clearly communicated to the customer (Communicate). The customer should feel not only informed but also heard and respected throughout the complaint-handling process. To that end, the company should provide timely updates, explain steps and timeliness, adapt and (if possible) personalise replies, tone and communication channels (Valentini et al., 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019).

This framework acknowledges that customers always evaluate the recovery experience, not only the solution. Satisfaction depends on what is done, how it is done, and how it feels (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Jung & Seock, 2017). Poor treatment or vague and unfair processes will undermine satisfaction and loyalty, even if the outcome was acceptable (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Maxham, 2001; Michel et al., 2009). On the other hand, reaching a satisfactory solution through a well-designed process consistently leads to: post-recovery satisfaction, trust and forgiveness, customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, stronger relationship and even brand attachment (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Maxham, 2001; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002).

### **1.2.2 Multi-departmental nature of complaint handling and the “handoff” issue**

Complaint handling is often a multi-actor service. Outcomes emerge from coordinated work across departments, including front-line staff and several specialist functions - a clear necessity, but also a common source of failures with a common denominator: “a handoff”.

Handoffs – any transfer of work, information, or responsibility - are repeatedly identified as high-risk points. The majority of research on this topic originates in healthcare, where poor handoff communication is linked to lost information, increased errors, and even serious safety events, with primary causes including lack of coordination, missing or unstructured information, time pressure, and unclear responsibility at unit boundaries (Abraham et al., 2021; Ong et al., 2011; Raeisi et al., 2019). Issues such as ownership ambiguity, communication gaps, and poor coordination are also common in complaint handling. Moreover, while they clearly affect the staff’s ability to handle individual cases, they can also inhibit structural learning, thereby undermining long-term efficiency and effectiveness (Gillespie & Reader, 2025).

On the bright side, tools such as service blueprinting and RACI matrices (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) help in diagnosing these issues and their causes. Service blueprinting aims to visualise the end-to-end complaint journey, separating customer actions and touchpoints, front-stage activities, back-stage activities, and all support systems and actors. Doing this helps reveal excessive wait times, expose misalignment between what is promised and what is eventually delivered, and identify cases of ownership ambiguity. RACI matrices can also prove useful. By clarifying who is responsible (does the work), accountable (owns the outcome), consulted (provides input), and informed (kept in the loop), the complaint handling process becomes less vague about role responsibilities. It defines who owns a complaint across handoffs (Gbabo et al., 2022).

### **1.2.3 Complaint-handling evaluation**

A crucial step in “closing the loop” and learning in complaint handling is performance evaluation. As mentioned before, customers judge both the outcome (was it fixed, how fast) and the experience (fairness, effort, empathy) of the process

(Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Tax et al., 1998). To evaluate performance, both aspects should be covered. Table 1 provides an overview of common process and experience metrics tapping into this interplay.

**Table 1: Overview of common process and experience KPIs in complaint handling**

Process KPIs	Experience KPIs
First response time	Post-case CSAT (Customer satisfaction)
Resolution time	CES (Customer effort)
SLA (Service-level agreement) compliance	Retention
First-contact resolution (FCR)	NPS (Net promoter score)
Reopen rate	Qualitative feedback
Escalation rate	
Backlog aging	

Source: (Own).

Applying such an integrated measurement approach ensures that improvements in complaint-handling performance are meaningful for customer experience, not just for internal dashboards and reports.

The concepts and ideas reviewed above portray complaints as a “moment of truth” in B2B service relationships. Customers judge not only whether the problem is solved, but also how fair, transparent, and timely the resolution process feels. In practice, these evaluations are shaped by the quality of case intake and routing, the clarity of ownership across departments, and the consistency of communication when resolution requires handoffs to other departments or external parties.

## 2 Case study

### 2.1 Learning Outcomes

The case study is designed to support the achievement of the following learning outcomes:

Learning outcome 1: Map Company X’s complaint handling journey end-to-end and identify where cross-department handoffs create risk (delay, information loss, ownership ambiguity).

Learning outcome 2: Diagnose the main drivers of slow or failed resolution using case evidence.

Learning outcome 3: Prioritise improvement actions among competing levers and justify the choice with data and service-recovery logic.

Learning outcome 4: Design a customer experience-aligned recovery approach that strengthens perceived procedural, interactional, and distributive fairness.

Learning outcome 5: Propose a compact KPI set that supports SLA performance, faster resolution, and closed-loop learning from complaints.

## **2.2 About Company X**

Company X is a large international firm that operates exclusively in business-to-business (B2B) markets. It serves organisational customers across multiple regions and relies on ongoing cooperation and repeat transactions. In this environment, how complaints are handled can influence not only immediate satisfaction with a single case but also customers' willingness to continue the relationship and recommend the provider.

Customer complaints and service issues are received by Company X's Customer Support Service, which acts as the first point of contact. Complaints can arrive through multiple channels (e.g. online submission, phone, e-mail), and each complaint is logged as a "case" with a unique identification number that allows tracking and follow-up. Company X uses a tiered support model (Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3) to route simple, well-documented issues to frontline specialists (Tier 1) and to escalate more complex cases to staff with the appropriate expertise (Tier 2 and 3). This support model should lead to faster case routing, fewer mistakes, and more effective complaint resolution. Additionally, the company has exact standards for complaint resolution time, defined by an SLA (Service Level Agreement). The time standards for resolving complaints are categorised by priority level (Table 2).

**Table 2: Complaint resolution time standards based on priority**

Priority	Time to resolve
Critical	4 hours
High	8 hours
Medium	5 days
Low	8 days

Source: (Own).

Resolving complaints often requires coordination across several organisational units beyond Customer Support. Depending on the nature of the issue, cases may involve:

- Technical Support and Repair for diagnostics and technical solutions,
- Sales, Pre-sales, and the Contract Centre for warranty and contractual questions, and
- Order Experience Department and Sales for order-related and logistical issues.

Customer communication is expected throughout the process, and cases should be closed only after the customer confirms that the problem has been fully resolved. After closure, Company X reviews cases to identify root causes and opportunities for improvement.

Despite this structured setup, the support team has observed recurring challenges:

- Cases can get stalled between units,
- Ownership of the “next step” is not always clear, and
- Longer resolution times appear to be a key driver of customer dissatisfaction (particularly when time expectations determined by the SLA - service-level agreement are not met).

### 2.3 Complaint-handling in Company X

After the complaint is received, the support team records it as a case in the internal system alongside a unique case identifier. This identifier serves as the anchor for documentation, internal coordination, and customer follow-up throughout the complaint handling process.

The first actual operational step is intake and verification. A Customer Support agent reviews the initial complaint information, checks the product ID and warranty status, and completes the case record so it can be routed correctly. At this point, the support agent assigns the case to a category that reflects the problem's nature. Tier 1 problems are simpler cases that can be resolved using standard procedures and available documentation. When Tier 1 cannot resolve the issue, the case is escalated to Tier 2 or Tier 3, depending on complexity and the type of knowledge required. This escalation logic is intended to handle straightforward issues efficiently and to enable disciplined handoffs and responsibility allocation.

In many cases, resolution depends on inputs from multiple organisational units beyond. Depending on the complaint type, the case may require technical diagnostics, repair activities, clarification of contracts and warranties, or order- and delivery-related checks. The support team acts as a coordinator, ensuring that information is conveyed clearly, the right unit is engaged at the right time, and the case is not delayed by unclear ownership or incomplete documentation.

Each case is closed only when the customer indicates the issue has been resolved completely. Once closure is confirmed, the case can be formally completed and included in internal review activities. The complaint-handling system also connects to customer feedback mechanisms: after completed interactions and closed cases, customers receive standardised surveys which include customer satisfaction (CSAT), customer experience and loyalty (NPS) measures. This feedback serves as a control mechanism. If a customer indicates that the problem was not resolved despite closure, the case can be reopened or rerouted for further handling. Finally, closed cases are reviewed to extract root causes and improvement opportunities, supporting the idea of complaints as inputs for service improvement.

Customer communication is open throughout the complaint processing. Customers can check the status of their complaint, and the support team follows up with customers at designated time intervals (3, 5, and 7 days) to provide more information and keep cases active, reducing avoidable wait times.

## **2.4 Frequent causes for complaints**

By reviewing 50 complaint cases, customers reported four recurring types of problems (Table 3).

The most frequent category concerns product/service quality issues. These complaints include product defects and performance or quality problems in the delivered product or service. While most of these cases were resolved, 2 remained unresolved, making this category the single largest contributor to unresolved outcomes. Next are invoicing-related cases, covering incorrect invoices, billing errors, and payment disputes. Of the 13 cases, 1 remained unresolved. These cases can still cause significant dissatisfaction because they often affect payments, approvals, and internal accounting processes on the customer side. Third, delivery and logistics problems accounted for 10 cases (late deliveries, shipping errors, missing orders), of which 9 were resolved, and 1 remained unresolved. This category has the longest average resolution time, at 8,7 days on average, excluding unresolved cases (9,4 days including unresolved cases). Lastly, technical support issues account for 10 cases and typically involve software/system errors that require troubleshooting. Again, 9 cases were resolved, and 1 remained unresolved. However, technical support issues usually require the least time to resolve.

**Table 3: Recurring types of problems with unresolved cases and resolution times**

Type of problem	Number of cases	Unresolved cases	Resolution times without unresolved cases (including unresolved cases) in days
Product/service quality	17	2	4.8 (5.7)
Invoicing issues	13	1	4.4 (4.6)
Delivery/logistics	10	1	8.7 (9.4)
Technical support	10	1	3.4 (5.2)

Source: (Own).

Overall, 45 cases (90%) were resolved, while 5 cases (10%) remained unresolved. Unresolved cases are most often due to:

- reliance on external dependencies (third-party providers or another internal unit),
- communication breakdowns (misunderstanding the issue, weak follow-up),
- awaiting customer action (the customer cannot continue troubleshooting or find a workaround),
- the possibility that the problem disappears, or
- cases being incorrectly closed and later reopened.

## **2.5 Key issues in the complaint handling**

Although the complaint handling system is designed as a structured, tiered process, internal case reviews and survey feedback suggest that a small set of recurring operational issues can significantly harm both efficiency and the customer experience—especially when complaints require cross-department coordination. Here are 4 key issues in Company X's complaint handling process.

### **1. High interdependence across departments increases the “handoff burden.”**

Many complaints cannot be resolved solely by the Customer Support team and require input from other departments. This multi-actor setup enables deeper problem-solving, but it also creates multiple handoffs where a case can pause while one unit waits for another's response. The departmental dependence adds complexity and increases the risk of downtime in the resolution process.

### **2. Ownership ambiguity and “assignment deadlocks” stall cases.**

A particularly important issue is not simply that many departments are involved, but that—at certain points—it is unclear who should “own” the next step. Company X's data suggests that the workflow is not sufficiently defined and is not applied consistently in practice. When a case does not clearly “belong” to a single category or team, it can become stuck between departments. This creates a deadlock in assignment and escalation decisions, prolongs resolution time, and increases the likelihood that key details are lost or diluted as the case moves between teams.

### **3. Resolution time is the most sensitive driver of customer dissatisfaction with complaint handling.**

Customer survey results after closed cases ( $n = 50$ ) indicate a clear pattern: ratings (on a scale from 1 – 5) related to the time needed to solve cases are the weakest ( $M = 3,4$ ), with ratings for the quality of resolution ( $M = 3,7$ ) and the information provided ( $M = 4,1$ ) being comparatively stronger. In other words, customers are not primarily complaining about being ignored or about unsatisfactory outcomes; they are reacting to how long it takes to reach closure. This is even more salient because

the company has explicit time-to-resolve expectations in place through SLA. When time standards are missed, the dissatisfaction grows, and customers may even consider switching to alternative providers.

#### **4. Unresolved cases are not random - they are predictable.**

There are several reasons a case may end without a confirmed solution: reliance on external parties, communication and follow-up breakdowns, waiting for customer action, the issue disappearing, or the case being closed incorrectly and later reopened. These failure points are important because they indicate which intervention levers may be effective (better intake, clearer ownership rules, tighter follow-up discipline, and stronger escalation criteria).

Overall, while most cases are solved, this often happens too slowly, resulting in avoidable waiting time due to cross-department handoffs, unclear ownership, and inconsistent workflow execution.

To resolve these issues, the support team lead must decide what to change first—within the constraints of the existing tier structure and the practical reality that some cases require cross-departmental input, external dependencies, or additional customer action.

Which change should the customer support team implement first to reduce resolution time and prevent cases from stalling between departments while maintaining solution quality and customer satisfaction? Justify your choice using the case evidence and the SLA constraints.

### **3 Discussion Questions**

1. Create a simple service blueprint of the complaint-handling process described in the case. Where do handoffs occur, and where is the risk of “cases getting stuck” highest? What 2-3 control points would you add (e.g., ownership rules, escalation triggers, required information at handoff)?
2. Using the case exhibits, which complaint category should the support team prioritise first—and why?

3. The case points to workflow inconsistency and assignment “deadlocks.” What do you think is causing these deadlocks in practice? Use the case facts to build 2-3 plausible root-cause hypotheses—and specify what additional internal data you would request to validate them.
4. If you were the support team lead, which single lever would you implement first within 90 days:
  - a. Better intake/routing
  - b. Tighter workflow + ownership consistency across tiers, or
  - c. Stronger customer communication during delays?
5. Outline your plan and justify it with case evidence.
6. Design a customer communication standard that supports fairness when resolution is slow. How would you ensure customers feel informed and respected, and when (if ever) would you recommend compensation or upgraded service as part of recovery?
7. The case describes post-closure analysis and survey feedback use. How should Company X convert complaint data into preventive improvements?

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Didactic use: The case study can be used in courses in the field of services marketing, consumer behaviour, CRM, Sales management and consumer experience (to be specified as appropriate). It is particularly relevant for the content covered in courses at the FEB, such as *Sales management* and *Sales* in undergraduate and university study programs, and/or *Services marketing*, *Consumer research*, and *Strategic marketing* in master's study programs.

