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Feature Article

‘Make Your Voice Count’

Imagine a world without conscious and assertive consumers who don't complain when transactions go wrong. In such situations, if consumers don't raise their voices on their dissatisfaction with the shoddy goods or services, the trader will continue giving the same bad service. Consumers will lose money, if goods or services provided to them are not as per the promises made by the trader/service provider or if the goods are not of merchantable quality. Thus, there are benefits for filing complaints against unfair trading practices by the unscrupulous traders and service providers.

Consumers don't have to endure bad moods of the enterprise or receive sub-standard goods or services upon payment. Changes will not happen unless consumers complain and make demands for actions.

While, the number of complaints filed with the Council is remarkable, there are consumers who will never lodge a complaint formally. They normally expect someone else to raise the concern or assume that the Council is aware of the issue. Unfortunately, with thousands of transactions taking place daily, it's impossible to keep a tab on the emerging consumer issues. However, consumers can help the Council by acting as its "eyes and ears" and reporting issues and concerns. The Council needs legitimate complaints from consumers to demand change in policies and practices.

Consumer voice is only strengthened when consumers act in unison and show consumer solidarity. Consumers can contribute to the change in policies and practices by lodging complaints on issues affecting them. There are chances that the complaints could result in recovering of consumers' money, and help prevent other consumers from falling victims to the unfair practices.

There are circumstances under which the Council is unable to provide redress to consumers when it requires major policy changes. For example, consumers have been lodging complaints with the Council against FEA for estimated bills, extremely high bills, increase in security deposits and destruction of appliances due to power surge. Unfortunately, the Council has been unable to provide redress due to the Electricity Act being written from the producer perspective. The Act protects FEA as a producer and distributor of electricity and fails to protect the interests of consumers. However, this does not mean that consumers should stop complaining. In fact, more legitimate complaints must be made to draw the attention of the policy makers to change the Electricity Act where FEA can be made accountable for its conduct.

Imagine if more consumers raise their concerns about an unfair business practice. – The effect would be much greater with far reaching implications. This solidarity will reflect an *expression of dissatisfaction* which will compel the traders/service providers or the enforcement agencies to act immediately and fix the problem or flaws.

For instance, in the case of *The Pink Window Creations*, consumers had paid for their goods but the online boutique had failed to deliver the items as per the orders. Had the affected consumers not come forward, no one would have known about it.

Council had recorded 214 formal complaints with monetary value in the sum of \$76,944. It appreciates the initiative and confidence of these consumers. Without their experiences and stories, the extent of this deception would not have been unleashed. As such, new consumers would have continued to be hoodwinked. Today, this case is before the court where the aggrieved consumers are awaiting justice to be done.

The growing market of second hand vehicles is another foremost concern. Some consumers invest their life's savings to own a vehicle. Nevertheless, in return they get vehicles of inferior quality that are disguised with a few cosmetic changes including tempering of odometer. In 2008, the Ministry of Finance requested complaints data from the Council that led to age reduction of second hand cars and the introduction of JEVIC.

Consumers are reminded that they have the right to know what they will receive before paying for a product or service. They have the right to obtain what they pay for, complain when they are not satisfied, and get the product repaired, or replaced. The aggrieved consumers can also get their money refunded for the faulty product.

There will be times when due to inadequate consumer protection laws and lack of inexpensive, speedy redress system- consumers may be disappointed. But there is no harm in highlighting consumer concerns and pertinent issues affecting the lives of consumers. Consumer solidarity is crucial and the Council is encouraging the members of the public to exercise their right. Great outcomes can be achieved if consumers work collaboratively towards a better and positive change.