

Time to take direct action?

Consumer Direct offers the public advice on everything from how to complain about faulty goods and services to avoiding financial scams. We ask its new Director, Christine Cryne, how well it is working



Christine Cryne: 'As a nation we don't complain enough'

Q Why was Consumer Direct created and how does it work?

A Primarily we're here to give advice to consumers. In the medium term what we're trying to do is educate them so that they can take on businesses themselves. We know that customers are not very good at complaining – we want to give them confidence. Research showed that after using our service 75 per cent of people were more confident about dealing with complaints.

Q What are the challenges for Consumer Direct?

A Originally the plan was for 4 per cent of the population to have used the service by 2010 and it looks as if we're going to reach that target by the end of next year. But when we start getting increased numbers of calls we have to make sure that we have the staff in place to handle it.

Q You were appointed in September. What do you hope to do for consumers?

A I'd like to get to the harder-to-reach people. I know ethnic minorities, older people and

those from disadvantaged backgrounds are key target markets and one of the things we're looking at is how we can get to them.

Q Do you have any frustrations with the way the service works?

A I think frustration is the wrong word – there's so much potential here to do good. It really is a case of making sure that we get the resources to deal with more calls while keeping quality at the heart of what we're doing. We don't want to be like NHS Direct which went mad in terms of expansion and then really couldn't deliver the quality of the service at the back end. Often new organisations are marketed so successfully that service levels are not maintained. That's the last thing I want for Consumer Direct.

Q How do you feel consumers react to shoddy service?

A I don't think they complain enough. I really think as a nation we don't complain enough and there are various reasons why we should. We've got to improve customer service as a nation because satisfied customers are the ones who come back.

Q What would be your message to consumers who get shoddy service?

A Don't be afraid. A lot of the time there are laws to protect you and people need to be aware of those rights and go out and use them.

Q What do consumers complain about most?

A Home maintenance and improvements account for over 9 per cent of complaints. The problem is often a lack of specification between the builder and the consumer but there's quite a bit of shoddy work in there, too.

Q It's been over two years since the launch of Consumer Direct at a cost of £30 million. Are consumers getting good value for money and do you think enough people know about the service?

A Well, calls cost only 4p a minute so I think that's very good value. At the moment, we've

got around 17 per cent public awareness but it does vary across the country. In areas where our centres are well established, awareness and the capacity to handle calls are higher.

Q What was the last thing you complained about?

A Short pint measures – which you'd expect with my background as director of Camra (the Campaign for Real Ale). I did complain to a major retailer about a delivery I was supposed to get, too. I'd taken the day off work and then on the morning of the delivery they phoned to say they couldn't come. That's not against the law but they did send me a £10 discount voucher so I got some redress.

CONTACTS

You can call Consumer Direct on 0845 404 0506 or access its library of advice factsheets at www.consumerdirect.gov.uk