

The Customer Who Left Quietly

The customer who leaves without a word has said something precise, by the one route a firm cannot read.

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Santa Anna, A. (2026). The Customer Who Left Quietly. In The Customer Already Told You (ch. 3). Luminous Prosperity Inc. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989061
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Published by Luminous Prosperity Inc. for Haute Lumière. Author ORCID 0009-0008-3244-0306.

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.23989061 · this record's page: business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-customer-already-told-you/03-the-customer-who-left-quietly/

Please cite as: Santa Anna, A. (2026). The Customer Who Left Quietly. In The Customer Already Told You (ch. 3). Luminous Prosperity Inc. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989061

Chapter Three of The Customer Already Told You. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/the-customer-already-told-you (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989055).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

The customer who leaves without a word has said something precise, by the one route a firm cannot read. It is a quarter to six on a Friday in March, and the owner of a builders' merchant is in the small office above the trade counter with the month's accounts list printed out in front of her. The yard below is closing. Forklifts are being parked, and somebody is sweeping sand off the concrete by the gate. She is reading the list as she reads it every month, account by account, and she stops at a name she has known for eleven years. A roofing contractor. He has bought from the yard every week since her father ran it: battens, felt, lead, the odd pallet of tiles. His last order was in the second week of January.

CHAPTER THREE

The Customer Who Left Quietly

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The Customer Who Left Quietly

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE CUSTOMER ALREADY TOLD YOU · CHAPTER THREE

Friday, the accounts list

It is a quarter to six on a Friday in March, and the owner of a builders' merchant is in the small office above the trade counter with the month's accounts list printed out in front of her. The yard below is closing. Forklifts are being parked, and somebody is sweeping sand off the concrete by the gate. She is reading the list as she reads it every month, account by account, and she stops at a name she has known for eleven years. A roofing contractor. He has bought from the yard every week since her father ran it: battens, felt, lead, the odd pallet of tiles. His last order was in the second week of January.

There is no complaint on his account. There is no note from the counter, no returned delivery, no unpaid invoice. She rings the counter and asks whether anyone has heard from him, and the man on the counter says no, now she mentions it, he hasn't been in. On the drive home, ten minutes later, she passes a merchant on the ring road and sees his van in their yard, tailgate down, being loaded.

The owner is a composite, drawn from the way these discoveries are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. What she feels on the ring road is not quite anger and not quite grief. It is the sinking a person feels when she learns that a relationship ended some time ago and she was the last to be told. Eleven years of Tuesdays, and he did not say a word.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon, in a book on doing business as a living system, puts the value of what she has missed more bluntly than most management texts would: "Complaints are the most valuable feedback you receive, and most businesses waste them."[11] The contractor did not even give her the chance to waste his. He took the most valuable feedback the yard could have received, whatever it was, and gave it to the merchant on the ring road instead, in the form of his custom.

This chapter makes one claim. The customer who leaves without a word has told the firm something precise, and the firm hears only that he has gone. A firm that wants its customers' information has to make it cheaper for them to say what is wrong than to leave, and has to go and ask the ones who leave anyway. Silence is not satisfaction. It is a message sent by the one route the firm cannot read.

Exit and voice

In 1970 the economist Albert Hirschman published a short book with a long subtitle, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*.[12] Its argument begins with an observation that sounds simple and has kept economists and political scientists busy for half a century. When the quality of what a firm offers declines, its customers have two broad ways of responding. They can leave, which Hirschman called exit. Or they can stay and say something, which he called voice: complain, protest, write, argue, ask for it to be put right.

Economists, he observed, had thought almost entirely about exit, because exit is how a market is supposed to discipline a firm. A customer who leaves takes her money with her, the firm's revenue falls, and the firm, if it is paying attention, improves. Hirschman's point was that exit is a poor messenger. It tells the firm that something is wrong and almost nothing about what. Voice carries the information. A complaint says which delivery, which product, which promise, and why it mattered. A falling revenue line says only that it fell. The book's argument is summarised here as it is generally read; its text was not reopened for this book.

Hirschman added a third term, and it is the one the owner needs most. Loyalty, in his account, is what holds a customer in place long enough to use voice instead of exit: the attachment that makes a person willing to say *this isn't good enough* rather than quietly go elsewhere. A loyal customer is not one who never

complains. He is one who complains first. The contractor had eleven years of loyalty, and something in the last few months spent it without his ever raising his voice. Either the yard gave him no easy way to speak, or he had spoken, in some small way, and nothing happened.

Hirschman made one further observation that the owner would recognise, though she has never read him. The customers most sensitive to a fall in quality, he argued, tend to be the first to leave, because they notice it soonest and mind it most, and their going deprives the organisation of exactly the voices that could have told it what was wrong. The point is given here as it is usually summarised from his book. In a builders' merchant it has a face. The contractor who notices first that the felt arrived after his men had gone is the one who runs the tightest jobs, keeps the best clients and pays on time. The customer who does not notice, or does not mind, stays. A yard that loses its most exacting customers silently, one at a time, is left with the ones who ask least of it, and its accounts list will look steady for a long time before it does not.

Santa Anna's canon has a sentence that frames the whole of Hirschman's book from the side of the firm. Writing on the way an organisation and its customers shape each other, it says that the company shapes what customers expect through what it offers, and "customers shape the company's evolution through their responses." Exit is a response. So is voice. Only one of them can tell the yard what to change.



One complaint in three

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE CUSTOMER ALREADY TOLD YOU · CHAPTER THREE

One complaint in three

How often do dissatisfied customers speak? The question has been asked many times, and the oldest careful answer comes from a survey of American households carried out in 1975. Arthur Best and Alan Andreasen asked people about the problems they had had with common purchases, and what they had done about them, and published their findings in 1977.[13] Consumers, they reported, perceive problems with many of the products and services they buy, and "voice complaints concerning about one-third of those problems."

Where they did complain, satisfactory resolution came in somewhat more than half of the cases. Third parties, consumer agencies and the like, played a very small part.

That is one survey, of one country's households, nearly fifty years ago, and its figures should be read as a picture of a pattern rather than a constant of nature. But the pattern it describes has held up in the larger literature on complaint behaviour, and its shape is what matters for the owner. Most problems are never reported to the firm. Of those that are, a large share are not put right. And the customer's private responses, telling friends, quietly switching, are invisible to the firm by design. The marketing scholar Jagdip Singh, setting out a taxonomy of complaint behaviour in 1988, distinguished exactly these routes: voice to the seller, private responses such as word of mouth and exit, and complaints to third parties.[14] Only the first arrives at the counter.

A word is needed here about the figures that usually appear in this place. A series of studies carried out for the United States Office of Consumer Affairs in the late 1970s and 1980s, by a research firm known as TARP, is the source most often given for striking statistics about how few dissatisfied customers complain and how many others each one tells. Those statistics circulate in many versions, attributed to different years and different reports, and this book did not reach the primary reports to check any of them. It therefore prints none. Best and Andreasen's one-third is less dramatic and better sourced, and it is enough.

Santa Anna's canon describes the attitude that turns this pattern into a loss, in its passage on how ventures listen, and the practice it proposes instead:

> *Instead of resolving complaints and closing tickets, practice complaint archaeology — dig beneath the surface complaint to find the unmet need, the broken expectation, the relationship wound. A customer who says "Your software is slow" might really be saying "I feel unsupported when I'm under deadline pressure."*

A complaint that arrives at the yard, if one third of problems produce one, is not a single customer's grievance. It is a sample, and it is usually a sample of something larger than its words.

Why a firm should want more complaints

In 1987 the economists Claes Fornell and Birger Wernerfelt, starting from Hirschman's exit and voice, built a formal model of what they called defensive marketing: the effort a firm spends keeping the customers it has, as opposed to winning new ones.[15] Their conclusion, stated in the paper's abstract, contradicts the instinct of most managers. Many firms, they wrote, try to reduce the number of complaints they receive, and "this objective is found to be questionable." Their analysis suggested instead that complaints from dissatisfied customers "should be maximized subject to certain cost restrictions," because a customer who complains can be kept, and a customer who leaves silently must be replaced, usually at greater cost.

It is a theoretical model, and its conclusions depend on its assumptions, which this chapter does not reproduce. But its central inversion is worth holding in mind, because it changes what a falling complaint count means. A yard that receives fewer complaints this year than last has not necessarily become better. It may have become harder to complain to. The counter may be busier, the manager harder to find, the phone line answered by a recording. Or customers may have concluded, from the last time, that saying something changes nothing, which is the most expensive conclusion a customer can reach, because it is the one that precedes exit.

The Margin, another of the house's books, reads [why the people who most need a door are rarely the first to knock](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-master-rsd-in-acedemia-final-manuscriptt/page/), and the same logic runs through a trade counter. The customers most likely to complain are often the ones with the least at stake, and the ones with the most at stake, a contractor with a roof half on and a client waiting, are the ones with least time to stand at a counter and explain. They do not complain. They ring the merchant on the ring road.

Santa Anna's canon draws a distinction, in a quite different setting, that helps here. Writing about what happens when a team speaks about a loss, it separates grief from complaint, and it gives complaint a sentence of its own: "Complaint says: "Something is wrong, and someone should fix it."" The canon's interest there is in grief, and it warns against complaint becoming a habit. But for a firm and its customers the sentence is the definition of a gift. A complaint is a customer telling the firm that something is wrong and that the firm is the one who could fix it. It is, in Hirschman's terms, the customer choosing voice when exit was available. The silent contractor made the other choice.

The call to the customer who left

What the owner does on Monday is the oldest practice in service, and the one most firms delegate until it means nothing. She rings him.

She does it herself, not the counter, and not a survey. She does not ring to win him back, and she says so in her first sentence, because a call that opens with an offer is heard as a sales call and answered as one. She says that she noticed he had not ordered since January, that she was sorry not to have noticed sooner, and that she would be grateful to know what had gone wrong, if anything had. Then she waits.

The answer, when it comes, is ordinary, as these answers usually are. In January the yard moved its delivery slots for trade customers from first thing in the morning to a window between ten and two, to suit the new driver's rota. The contractor's men start on a roof at half past seven. Twice in January they stood on scaffolding for three hours with nothing to fix, and on the second occasion the felt arrived after they had gone. He mentioned it at the counter, once, to someone he did not know, who said he would pass it on. The merchant on the ring road delivers at seven. That was all.

The canon's book on doing business as a living system describes the attitude she needs for the call, in its account of what a listening firm does instead of surveying. Most firms listen through instruments, it says, but deep listening is "the practice of receiving another human being's experience with enough openness, patience, and presence that you perceive not just what they're saying but what they're needing, feeling, and becoming." The owner does not need the contractor's feelings. She needs what he needed, which was felt on a scaffold at half past seven.

Chapter 7 carries the call as a run sheet, with the opening sentence, the questions in the order they are asked, the mistakes at each step and how to read the answers, together with a page for reading each complaint that does arrive as a sample of the many that do not, and Chapter 6 places them in the order of a first ninety days. What can be said here is what she does with the answer. She does not argue with it, and she does not tell him about the driver's rota. She thanks him, says what she will look into, and says when she will ring back. Then she rings four more trade customers whose orders have fallen, and two of them mention the delivery window. The third mentions a price. The fourth says, after a pause, that he had not thought anyone at the yard would want to know, and then talks for twenty minutes. She writes down what each of them says in their own words, on one page, and at the bottom of the page she writes the only figure she needs for the decision, which is the sum of their four accounts last year, from her own ledger.

There are predictable ways to get this wrong. A call made by a junior member of staff, from a script, is a survey with a voice. A call that turns into an offer, a discount or a promise, teaches the customer that leaving is how to negotiate. A call made only to the largest accounts misses the small contractor who was about to become a large one. And a call that hears something and changes nothing is worse than no call at all, because it confirms the customer's conclusion that saying something is pointless.

She also changes the counter, which is where the contractor spoke once and was not heard. The man on the counter now writes down anything a trade customer says that sounds like *this didn't work for us*, in the customer's words, on a sheet that she reads every Friday with the accounts list. The sheet is not a complaints log, which would need a form and a category and a reference number. It is a page of sentences. The house's Luminous 100 says of mapping a customer's path through a firm that each point of contact is a meeting between two living systems, and "the quality of that meeting either nourishes both or depletes both." The counter is that meeting, fifty times a day. The page is filled on Monday and read on Friday, and by the following Monday something on it has changed, or the customer who said it has been told why not.

Not every customer who says something will be pleased by what happens next, and how a firm answers the ones it has let down is a subject of its own, with an evidence base more mixed than its folklore (Chapter 4). And not every customer who stops contacting a firm has left it. Some have stopped because their problem was finally solved, and some because they gave up, and a firm that counts the contacts that no longer arrive (Chapter 2) has to know which is which before it can believe the count.



What voice costs, and what it saves

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · THE CUSTOMER ALREADY TOLD YOU · CHAPTER THREE

What voice costs, and what it saves

It is worth being plain about the economics, without inventing a figure. The contractor bought every week for eleven years. The yard's own records say what his account was worth in a year; the owner has the number on the printed list in front of her, and it is the only number that matters for her decision. Against it stand the cost of the delivery window, which suited the rota, and the cost of the call, which was ten minutes of her Monday.

The deeper cost is the information that never arrives. For every contractor who leaves silently because of the delivery window, there may be others who are still ordering and grumbling on the scaffold, and others who have quietly moved their urgent orders elsewhere and kept only the routine ones. None of them appears as a complaint. All of them appear, eventually, in the accounts list, as a slow decline that nobody can explain. Fornell and Wernerfelt's model is a formal way of saying what the owner learned on the ring road: a complaint is cheaper than a departure, and a firm that makes complaining easy is buying its own information at the lowest price it will ever be offered.

Santa Anna's canon puts the larger stake in a sentence about where an organisation's future is decided. "The places where organizational systems meet — between departments, between the organization and its customers, between the organization and its community — are the zones of evolutionary potential." The trade counter is such a place. Each contractor who leaves knows why he moved his order, and the counter is the one place in the yard where he might have said so.

Hearing the ones who leave

The article this chapter began as ended above a trade counter. The book can go further, into the finer points of hearing customers who have stopped speaking, in organisations of every kind.

Find them in your own records first. A lapsed customer is one whose pattern has changed: a trade account that ordered weekly and has not ordered for a month, a subscriber who has stopped using the service before cancelling it, a patient who no longer books, a client whose renewals have shrunk. Each organisation has its own pattern and its own records. The list does not need to be clever. It needs to be read, every month, by someone senior enough to act on what it says.

Make the call senior and early. The call to a customer who has left works best when it comes from someone the customer would not expect to hear from, within weeks rather than months of the change, and without an offer. Weeks matter because the customer still remembers what happened. Seniority matters because it tells the customer the question is real. And the absence of an offer matters most of all: a call that opens with a discount is a negotiation, and it teaches the customer, and everyone the customer tells, that leaving is how to get one.

Open with what you noticed and ask one question. *I noticed you haven't ordered since January, I'm sorry not to have noticed sooner, and I'd be grateful to know what went wrong, if anything did.* Then wait, and write down what is said in the customer's own words. Ask a second question only to understand the first answer better. The book's run sheet in Chapter 7 gives the questions in order and the replies that close a call too early.

Read every complaint as a sample. If, as Best and Andreasen found, people voice complaints about something like one problem in three, every complaint that arrives stands for others that did not. The useful question about a complaint is therefore not only *how do we put this right?* but *who else has met this, and not*

said so? The answer is often in the records: the other deliveries in the same window, the other accounts on the same tariff, the other tenants on the same estate. A complaint read this way becomes a search, and the search usually finds customers who are still with the firm and still grumbling.

Make voice cheaper than exit. Most firms make complaining harder than leaving without meaning to: a phone line answered by a menu, a form with a reference field the customer does not have, a counter where the person who listens is not the person who can act. Each of these can be checked by trying it, as a customer would, on an ordinary afternoon. The counter page in Chapter 7 is the cheapest instrument there is, a sheet of sentences in the customer's words, read every week by the person who owns the business.

And do not celebrate a falling complaint count until you know why it fell. Fornell and Wernerfelt's model is a reminder that fewer complaints can mean a firm that has become harder to talk to, and Chapter 5 sets out how to tell the difference from records the firm already keeps. Chapter 6 places the lapsed-customer calls and the counter page in the ninety days.

Friday, the accounts list, in May

It is a quarter to six on a Friday in May, and the owner is in the office above the trade counter with the month's accounts list. The yard below is closing. Trade deliveries now go out from seven, and the driver's rota was changed to fit them, which took a fortnight and one difficult conversation. Beside the accounts list is the counter's page of sentences, three of them this week, one about a pallet of blocks that arrived with a broken strap, one about the price of lead, one about the coffee machine.

She reads down the list and stops at the roofer's name. Two orders in April, three in May. It is not every week, yet. He told her on the phone that the ring-road merchant was all right but that he missed being known.

She turns the page and reads the sentence about the strap.

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