In a service industry like tourism it’s inevitable that a guest will lodge a complaint. How a business handles guest complaints separates the professionals from the amateurs. Not every dissatisfied guest will make a complaint. Therefore, complaints must be viewed as valuable sources of intelligence about possible issues that may need attention.

**WHY DO GUESTS COMPLAIN?**

There is only ONE reason why guests complain. . .

Guests complain when they do not receive what they thought they should have received.

In other words, their expectations were not met.

Guests generally expect friendly service, clean, well-maintained facilities and a level of quality in line with what they paid.

Failure to provide these will result in guest dissatisfaction, which may lead to a complaint. If it does, this is a signal that others are probably feeling the same way but NOT telling you.

**WHY ARE EXPECTATIONS SOMETIMES GREATER THAN REALITY?**

1. Because of the subjective or unrealistic promises made in advertising material.
2. Because the price is high compared to similar properties.
3. Because the price does not match the level of quality of the product.
4. Because while expectations are realistic, the product is poorly presented.
5. Because the guest develops preconceived high expectations that are formed from other sources of information. For example, the product was “talked up” by other users.

In most cases complaints are the result of points 1, 2, 3 and 4. And these are factors that are within the control of managers.

**WHY DO PEOPLE TRAVEL?**

It is important to understand why people travel and what motivates visitors to choose a particular holiday or short break. If you have empathy for what motivates guests, this will assist you to meet their expectations.

**IN GENERAL, PEOPLE TRAVEL FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS...**

1. To celebrate a special occasion with partner, family or friends (celebration).
2. To experience places that are new and different (exploration).
3. To get away from their normal lives and immerse themselves in some luxury that they cannot have at home. To break the monotony of everyday life (escape).
4. To expand their understanding of the world in which they live (learning).
5. To pursue particular interests (self fulfilment).
6. For work reasons rather than leisure (corporate travel).

These ‘reasons for travel’ are intangible. They meet emotional needs, not practical needs. In most cases, the role of an accommodation venue is not to provide a bed and meals, but to enhance an experience and appeal to certain internal needs.

**How does your product facilitate and embellish your guests’ celebration, exploration, escape, and learning?**

The manager who satisfies the intangible needs of visitors will deliver a better product and have more satisfied guests.
WHAT DO PEOPLE COMPLAIN ABOUT?

The South Australian Tourism Commission receives many complaints about tourism operators. Here are some general examples:

1. "WE DID NOT RECEIVE WHAT WAS PROMISED IN THE ADVERTISEMENT"
   This relates to things like ‘home-made biscuits and wine on arrival’ not being provided, ‘generous cooked breakfast’ when only continental provisions are supplied, ‘spacious’ when the rooms are small, ‘two-person spa’ when the spa was located in cottage ‘A’ and guests were given cottage ‘B’.
   Message: Deliver what you promise. Deliver more than you promise. If you can’t deliver it every time without fail, do not promise it!

2. "THE CONDITION OF THE PROPERTY WAS VERY POOR"
   This relates to windows that don’t open or don’t lock, lights that don’t work, missing cutlery, heating or cooling that doesn’t work and so on.
   If you are renting a shack, you do not expect a 5 star property. If the ‘shack’ is advertised as an ‘ultimate beachside villa’ then anything less than perfect will be a disappointment.
   Message: Keep your property maintained. There is NO excuse for offering broken-down services to guests. Reduce your price if you cannot justify the level of quality that you have promised.

3. "THE PROPERTY WAS NOT CLEAN"
   This usually relates to the bathroom and kitchen areas not being clean, discoloured tile grout, hair in the drain, soap scum on the glass shower screen, blankets dusty or stained, floors sticky.
   The property may have been cleaned after last use but if it is not used again for some weeks, spiders, dust and general stuffiness will detract.
   Message: Consumers expect a high level of cleanliness for all standards of accommodation. There is NO excuse for a poor level of cleanliness. Keeping a property clean requires good processes - cleaners rostered at the right time, with the right skills and equipment. Remember, it may be necessary to open up and dust and remove spider webs before a guest’s arrival.

4. "THE SERVICE WE RECEIVED WAS TERRIBLE"
   This relates to the attitude of the people providing the service. It is often about inflexibility or poor training. The owner was rude. The owner would not listen. The staff could not be found when I needed them.
   Message: The guest may not always be right, but in their minds they are. It is the guest who is paying, so treat them with respect and be empathetic. Or better still, objectively assess whether they have a point, and if possible, fix the problem so that no more guests will have cause to complain about that issue again.
DOS AND DON’TS
When responding to guest complaints, here are some guidelines to assist you to effectively resolve the situation, preventing any ongoing dispute:

Do . . .
- Listen to the guest. Acknowledge the issue they raise and show empathy for the problem.
- Promise to act on the feedback they have given.
- Tell the guest their complaint will result in improvement to your business.
- Thank the guest for providing feedback to you.
- Consider refunds (full or partial). It is better to give comfort than to have a long-term negative ambassador for your business. It also demonstrates that you are serious about addressing the problem.
- Act on a permanent solution to the issue. If one guest raises a matter, you can be sure that others are also experiencing it but not telling you.
- Respond to written complaints in writing as soon as possible.
- Include agents in your response if the guest has booked this way. Be proactive and demonstrate that you have acted positively.

Don’t . . .
- Be defensive and give excuses. Accept what is said and move on.
- Tell the guest that they are the first person ever to mention this problem.
- Take the feedback personally. This is sometimes hard but rarely is the complaint about you. It is about what your valued guest did not get.
- Get upset with or show annoyance with the guest, either face to face or in writing.
- Ignore the complaint but be objective and act were possible.

LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES
Consumers are entitled to receive what was promised them. They also have basic rights under consumer protection legislation.
This particularly relates to the contract (written or verbal) between you and the guest. If this is breached, the guest can rightly ask the Office of Consumer and Business Affairs to investigate. They have powers to prosecute when breaches of the Acts, for which they administer, occur.
Be familiar with your responsibilities. The Office of Consumer and Business Affairs website contains very good information: www.ocba.sa.gov.au

7 STEPS TO ELIMINATE COMPLAINTS AND INCREASE REPEAT BUSINESS
1. Promise only what you can deliver
   - Review advertising material for accuracy
   - Avoid the use of words that are ambiguous.
   - If you use words that are subjective like ‘unique’, ‘generous’, ‘romantic’ and ‘luxury’ remember that people have different expectations of what these mean. What you deliver must exceed their expectations or you risk a dissatisfied guest.

2. Determine the market price
   - Review competitors’ products and prices.
   - Understand what consumers get for the same amount of money in other properties. Include hotels and motels and B&Bs.
   - Guests want ‘value’ from any purchase.

3. Reserve some surprises.
   - Give something that the guest was not expecting.
   - Over-deliver.

4. Adopt a ‘the guest is always right’ attitude
   - Do not dispute or disagree without viewing the issue from the customer’s perspective.
   - Respect the guest’s opinion.
   - Promise to do all you can to rectify.
   - It is better to refund, retreat and restore guest confidence than to have that guest tell all their friends (and others) about their bad experience.

South Australia. A brilliant blend.
5. Establish a continuous guest feedback system (see The Feedback Loop below)
   - Encourage guests to tell you about their stay.
   - Do not rely on a ‘visitors book’ for this purpose.
   - Ask them to help you improve your service for others by completing a survey.
   - Accept what they tell you.
   - Act on their suggestions where practical.
   - It is better to refund, retreat and restore guest confidence than to have that guest tell all their friends (and others) about their bad experience.

6. Monitor feedback
   - Log and collate the feedback you receive.
   - Look for trends and patterns.

7. Respond to feedback positively
   - It is the feedback that you receive that allows you to improve your business. It’s the feedback you do not receive that does damage without you being able to react.
   - Always respond positively and courteously.
   - Do not make excuses.
   - Promise to act. In most cases consumers want to see that their feedback will make a difference and improve the experience for others.

**THE FEEDBACK LOOP**

This is an important tool to ensure that you are meeting all guests’ expectations. It means providing all guests with the opportunity to tell you how they enjoyed their stay and what, if anything, could have made their stay more enjoyable.

A visitors’ book is not suitable for this purpose. You need to directly engage the guest to provide you with specific information.

A regular flow of feedback will:
   - Encourage people to tell you what they think
   - Highlight all issues, large and small
   - Provide you with the opportunity to improve your service
   - Prevent issues that lead to formal complaints
   - Improve your business and increase your sales

The system should be:
   - Written and private so that the guest can complete it without any pressure
   - Systematically handed out and systematically collected, for example given with breakfast on last day of stay or upon check out
   - Succinct and simple to complete – tick boxes
   - Easy for you to collate

**SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR A FEEDBACK LOOP:**

- How did you hear about us?
- What encouraged you to stay with us?
- Please rate the following:
  
  Your room:  
  - Very satisfied 
  - Satisfied 
  - OK 
  - Unsatisfied 
  - Very unsatisfied 

  Our service:  
  - Very satisfied 
  - Satisfied 
  - OK 
  - Unsatisfied 
  - Very unsatisfied 

  Breakfast:  
  - Very satisfied 
  - Satisfied 
  - OK 
  - Unsatisfied 
  - Very unsatisfied 

Be sure to wrap the survey in an introduction that welcomes feedback, demonstrates your interest in their views and demonstrates that your business will be improved if feedback is provided.