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Go to:

**The Observer** **Cash**

<a href="#">Home</a>	<a href="#">UK news</a>	<a href="#">International</a>	<a href="#">Politics</a>	<a href="#">Business</a>	<a href="#">Comment</a>	<a href="#">Leaders</a>	<a href="#">Focus</a>
<a href="#">Sport</a>	<a href="#">Review</a>	<a href="#">Magazine</a>	<a href="#">Screen</a>	<a href="#">Travel</a>	<b>Cash</b>	<a href="#">Letters</a>	<a href="#">Food</a>



## Blogger power to the people

Moaning has more impact when it has a huge audience, says Nick Kettles

Sunday June 27, 2004

[The Observer](#)

Making snippy comments about big brand names in online chat rooms is small beer compared with the lengths some consumers will go to in order to record their woes.

After months of complaining to Mastercare, the Dixons aftercare service, about a broken TV, Marie Griffiths created a blog (online diary) about her experience.

To make sure Dixons took notice, she invited others to commit themselves not to buy anything from it or Currys. According to the online news site The Register, the cost of the pledges soon reached £35,186.

It is impossible to know whether there was merit in her claims, but compared with the cost of a replacement television set, figures like these must be difficult for a brand to ignore.

Leslie de Chernatony, professor of brand marketing at Birmingham University Business School, says that making a complaint online is different from sounding off at the pub: 'The customer immediately has a potential audience of thousands.'

Today, brands are defined by more than their logo. A brand invariably embodies a set of ideals its makers hope customers will share. But when those ideals are at odds with a customer's experience or awareness of the company's conduct, reputations can be dented. Understandably, brands are at pains to avoid this.



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John Straw, chief executive of online brand positioning company Netrank, says it advises its clients to deal quickly with customer complaints that have become the source of online discussion.

'It's better to spend some money on dealing with one person, than risk a complaint going viral and damaging the value of the brand in the long term,' he says.

The viral effect of the web is what makes it the ultimate consumer empowerment tool; ideas and opinions can spread quickly via email and we links. Unlike letters to customer services, the web gives consumers a fighting chance of being heard.

For example, before the withdrawal of Dasani, Coca-Cola's 'mineral-cum-tap water' product, the National Consumer Council researched online consumer opinion - mostly disparaging - to help formulate its position. Once it had, it was soon getting calls from reporters in the US, where Dasani is still sold.

As of February, Ms Griffiths has stopped posting updates on [mastercare.blog.spot.com](http://mastercare.blog.spot.com), but some consumers have much more spleen to vent. Following United Airlines' (UAL) inability to satisfy Jeremy Cooperstock's complaints in 1996-97, he launched [www.untied.com](http://www.untied.com), widely acknowledged as the internet's first gripe site.

Since then, it has received more than 5,000 letters from people like Jeremy and helped a group of flight attendants convince UAL to give ground in negotiations with their union. Untied.com has become the proverbial thorn in the side.

A spokeswoman for United Airlines, a unit of UAL, said the airline preferred that customers with legitimate complaints contacted the customer service department. If a complaint was forwarded by a third party site, 'of course we would respond to it', she said.

It's possible that some brands use 'info-cleansing' outfits, which, for the right fee, will scrub clean offending comments from chat rooms and newsgroups. But brands are increasingly, learning to listen first.

Not all opinion is inflammatory; some is constructive. A leading car manufacturer became aware from the web that some women felt they had not been well served by predominantly male design teams and acted on that information.

#### Tools

Text-only version  
Send it to a friend  
Save story



Making your voice heard online also helps other consumers.

Shoppers increasingly use the web to research purchases in the high street. Your opinion may help others to make an informed choice.

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[Front page](#)

[Story index](#)

As the traditional sales maxim goes, if you have a good experience of a company you'll tell two or three others, but if you have a bad experience you'll tell 10. Thanks to the web you can potentially tell millions - and when brands listen, it can bring improvements that benefit everyone.



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