

# COMPLAINTS

The New Most Valuable Asset



WHITEPAPER

 socap  
the network for consumer professionals | australia

SOCAP Members reveal the ongoing impacts on business; consumer relations; complaints handling; and dispute resolution and shine a light on customer needs for the next 24 months as businesses, families and consumers continue to tally the impacts of the pandemic.

Complaints: The New Most Valuable Asset, SOCAP Member Survey\* asked members to report on key themes on the changes they have experienced as a result of the pandemic on a customer and organisational level; the role of complaints handlers in supporting customers in vulnerable circumstances; customer expectations and behaviours; industry challenges and opportunities; and member association support.

### **Empower your team**

If you would like to see how your team can meet quality best practice benchmarks through SOCAP Complaints Professional Certification visit [socap.org.au](http://socap.org.au) or call Fiona Brown on 02 9167 8119 to start your certification pathway.

*\*The SOCAP Member Survey Complaints: The New Most Valuable Asset was conducted in August and September 2020.*





# Priority Areas

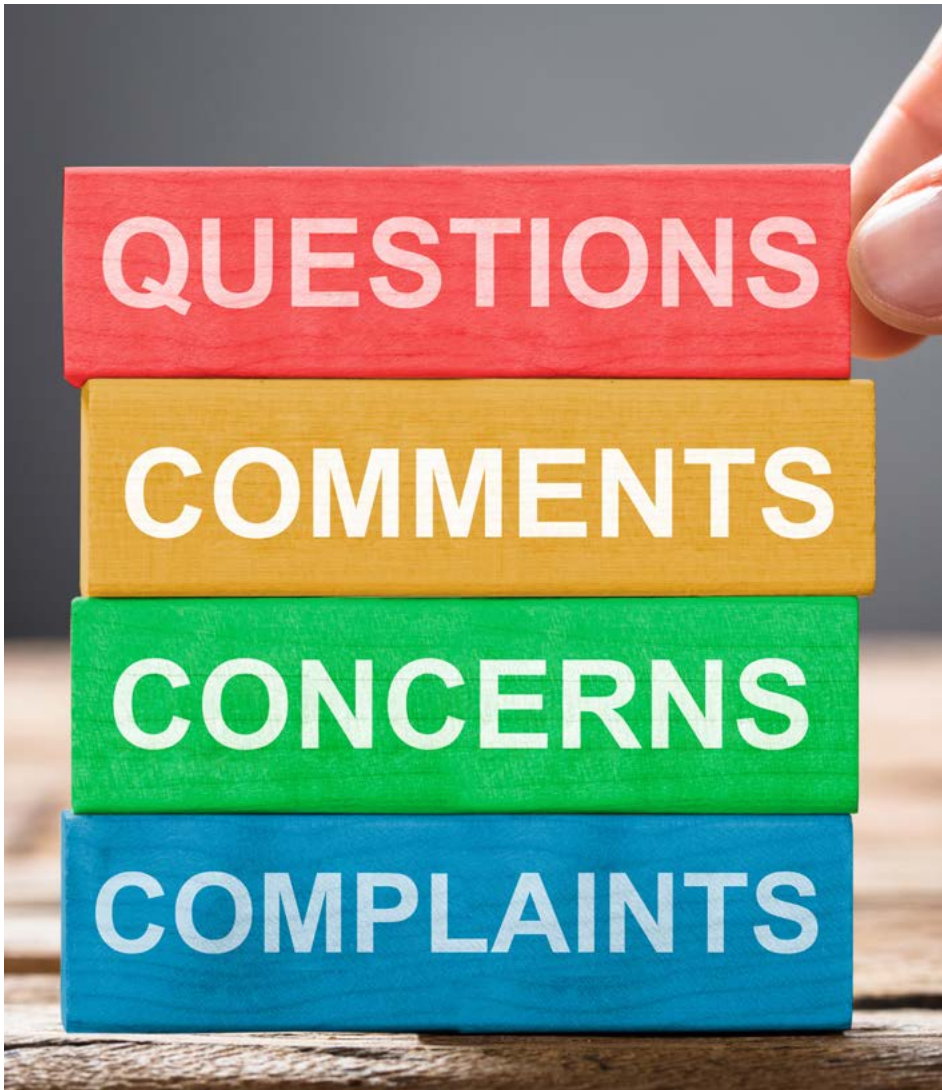
**32%** of respondents see the need for or want greater empowerment in their role to enable them to assess each case on its merits, to have greater autonomy to resolve complaints and to influence outcomes that support consumers.

**83%** of respondents noted increased customer vulnerability in terms of heightened emotions and anxiety, and or identified needs or requests for hardship support, with the added concern that customers may be facing continuing vulnerable circumstances.

**18%** of members surveyed stated the importance of showing empathy and understanding to customers, with many noticing a growing expectation from customers for connection by being listened to and their issues acknowledged.

**45%** of respondents have identified the need for upskilling complaint handlers, including identifying and responding to vulnerability, handling difficult conversations, written communications, as well as essential training for frontline staff, to minimise escalation.

# Complaints: The New Most Valuable Asset



## **A snapshot view:**

The survey findings reveal a resilient complaint handling industry under increasing pressure yet responding with care and empathy to customers facing ongoing vulnerability and financial hardship. Complaint handlers are increasingly required to manage difficult conversations and engage with customers who may be exhibiting stressed and anxious behaviours requiring strong skills in vulnerability identification and assessment, as well as enhanced debriefing strategies.

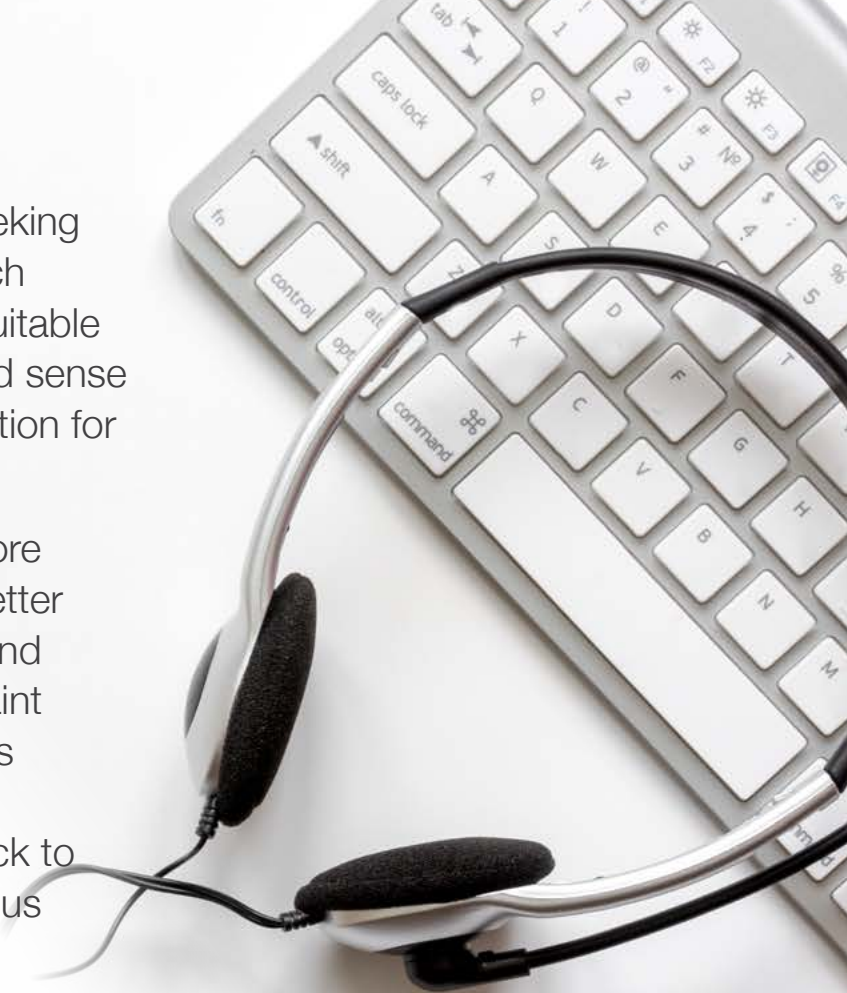
Agile and flexible operations have shown to be indispensable during COVID-19 as business processes have required review to meet the fast-changing needs of customers. Opportunities are being recognised for enhanced customer service by valuing customer complaints as insights for systemic change.

Complaint handlers see themselves at the forefront of the customer experience and want to be empowered to make decisions and ably resolve customer issues.

At a time when customers are seeking connection, this enabling approach supports rapport building and equitable outcomes, as well as an increased sense of empowerment and job satisfaction for complaint professionals.

Members have made a call for more adequately skilled resources to better manage customer expectations and be able to resolve issues. Complaint handlers want a strong complaints management culture that values customer complaints and feedback to inform best practice and continuous quality improvements.

**Complaints: The New Most Valuable Asset survey** revealed five key themes on the minds of practitioners in Australia and New Zealand to support them for effective complaint handling and better organisational and customer outcomes.



1.

Behaviour of complainants has, and is changing

2.

Complaints teams are providing an essential connection service for consumers

3.

Increasing empowerment for complaint handlers

4.

Staff resilience

5.

A future vision

# 1 Behaviour of complainants has, and is changing



Through the early months of 2020, consumers showed more patience, and when lodging a complaint, they exhibited calmer behaviours. However, the ongoing impacts of the pandemic seem to have taken their toll on consumers who are presenting with greater stress, as well as increased vulnerability and hardship by many. Subsequently the complaint handling industry has been responding to customers presenting with dwindling patience and heightened emotional behaviours, as household stress continues.

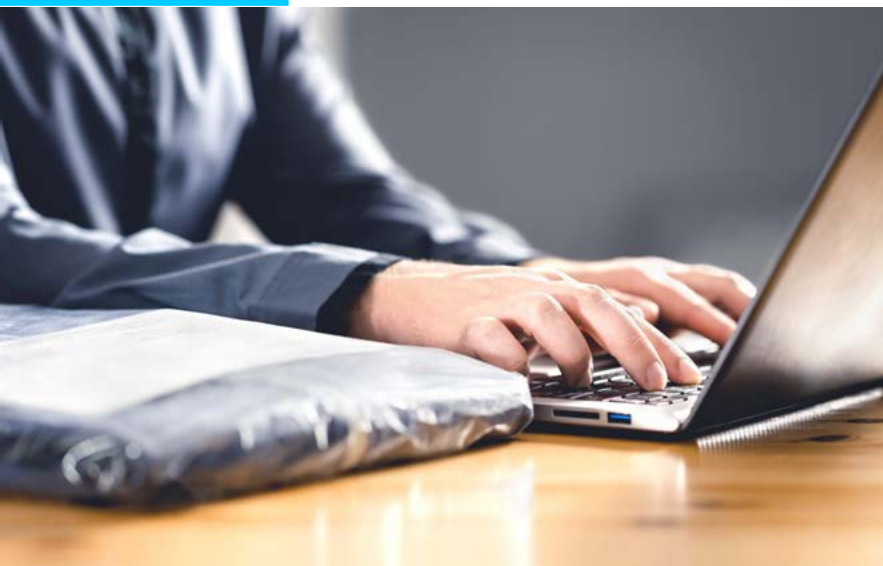
In turn, for some complainants such ongoing pressures have triggered presentations of unreasonable complainant behaviour, with respondents seeing a rise in unreasonable complainant behaviour from March 2020 to September 2020, as patience with organisations for support and service time wanes.

Furthermore, vulnerability continues its rise and is being experienced by those who see themselves in new circumstances who have not been in this situation before and as community financial supports are decreased, it is likely to exacerbate the current situation.

‘ Greater expectation for empathy and connection ’

# 2

## Complaints teams are providing an essential connection service for consumers



‘ Understanding the boundaries between being a complaint handler and a counsellor ’

Complaints teams are playing a vital role and what is akin to an essential community service in responding empathically to consumer vulnerability and working with customers to support them with issues of hardship including payment plans and flexible options.

Building rapport and trust is crucial to identifying underlying issues and developing effective solutions with the customer. Customers are expecting their complaints resolved and hardship support provided, as well as acknowledgement and connection, requiring high level communication skills.

With more customers facing ongoing vulnerable circumstances, some for the first time, there is a growing need for complaints handlers to be able to deal simultaneously with a range of issues underpinning reasons for complaints and working with the customer to find effective solutions.

**Insufficient resources as companies fail to recognise the importance of a strong complaints management culture**

# 3

## Increasing empowerment for Complaint Handlers to resolve issues

With an industry under flux and the requirement for quicker response and resolution of complaints, there are increasing recommendations for the empowerment of complaint handlers to make decisions, to be sufficiently skilled and be able to think their way through a problem and come up with a viable solution in relationship with the customer.

A case management approach in which each case is assessed on its merits is seen to facilitate the resolution of issues, either in first contact or from start to finish. This enabling approach helps the building of rapport and equitable outcomes, as well as contributing to increased staff satisfaction.

Complaint handlers see themselves as being at the forefront of customer experience and holding insightful data that if used effectively can inform business transformation. Complaint handling teams want to be able to influence their organisations in a positive way and have more connectivity to continuous best practice resulting in better systems and customer outcomes.



“ I think complaints can be a terrific way of looking at insights into our business practices – so actually investigating ourselves through complaints. ”

– ROI of Effective Complaint Handling: Public Organisations

# 4

## Staff resilience



Increased pressure on complaint handlers is leaving many feeling emotionally stretched, especially during interactions with customers facing vulnerable circumstances and who are stressed or anxious. Some complaint handlers also expressed frustration and confusion about unrealistic expectations for organisational remediation.

Reduced resilience in staff, many facing their own challenges or working from home without sufficient on-hand support, is impacting some interactions particularly with customers presenting with heightened emotions.

The importance of team connection and resilience strategies have been recognised as key to avoiding staff fatigue and burnout, especially while working at home and at a time when a post-call debrief may not be easily accessible.

‘ Less resilience and coping mechanisms by both customers and staff ’

# 5

## Future vision



Complaint professionals are upbeat and predict a buoyant future for their profession, yet it has challenges ahead in meeting customer expectations. They see the volume of work increasing and the value they bring to consumers and organisations to be recognised.

Members aspire to an industry formed by organisations with a foundational culture that values customer complaints and is modelled on fairness and accessibility. The current climate for change is seen as a real opportunity for streamlining processes and guidelines, addressing supply issues, providing accessible and agile points of connection. Such a culture values the pivotal role of the complaint handler in informing systemic change and strengthening brand reputation.

# 5



Successful customer focussed businesses will address systemic issues through the continuous review of customer feedback and consequent improvement of complaint handling approaches and practices. Complaint handlers will be recognised as key to the success of the organisation and be appropriately empowered and skilled to influence positive change.

**There is a strong view that by learning from mistakes and utilising complaints data, business can gain a deeper understanding of the issues to identify the root causes of problems, as opposed to a band-aid approach, and provide real opportunity for systemic change.**

# Summary



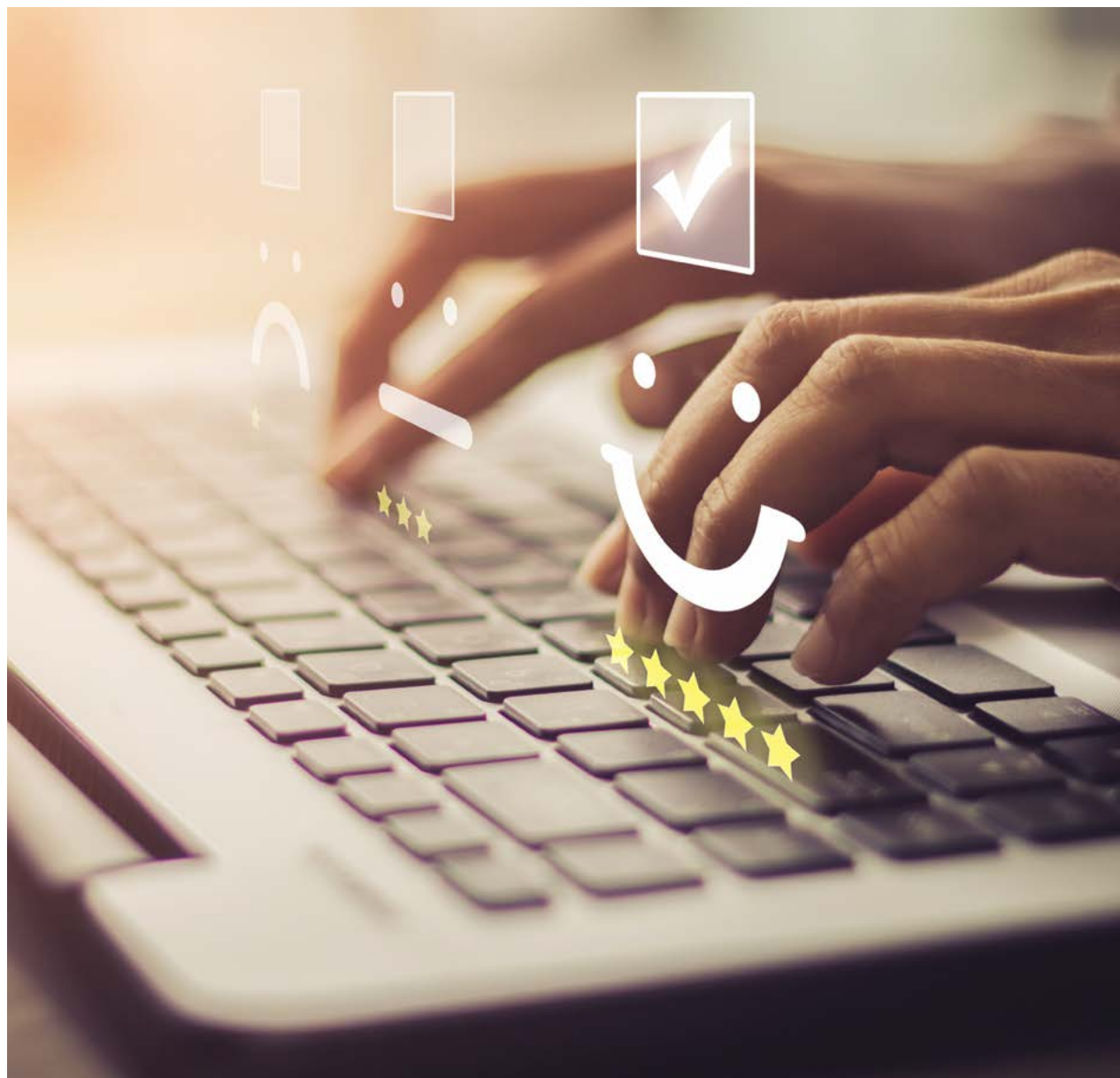
**Complaints: The New Most Valuable Asset, SOCAP Member Survey** shows that complaints professionals have experienced an increase in caseloads this year, particularly since the start of COVID-19 in March 2020. A significant increase in customer vulnerability was reported by 83% of respondents, in terms of heightened emotions and anxiety, and or identified needs or requests for hardship support, with an expectation for the trend to continue through 2021.

Complaint handlers are drawing on their key personal attributes supporting the exceptional interpersonal and communication demands of the role and recognise essential skills must be developed to support effective engagement and management of customer complaints, especially during a time of crisis. Human centred communication skills, such as listening, building rapport, and showing empathy are now not only expected but are intrinsically needed by consumers, especially those facing ongoing vulnerability.

The need for upskilling Complaint Handlers in a number of key areas has been stated by 45% of respondents, many highlighting the importance of frontline staff having essential customer service and complaint handling skills.

As many customers may find themselves facing vulnerability for the first time, complaint handlers need to be skilled in the identification of vulnerability, as well as able to assess and implement effective customer solutions.

As the pandemic continues to impact households, complaints handlers are apprehensive about continued and increased customer vulnerability triggering more instances of unreasonable complainant behaviour, causing added work stress and a strain on staff resilience. Effective strategies to maintain staff wellbeing and resilience is critical to supporting their ability to respond effectively to customers.





As households rebalance to a new normal post COVID-19 they will be looking to their public and private services for understanding and support which will play a role into the future for brand reputation and organisational regard from both consumer and staff.

Complaint handlers are calling for more empowerment in their role with 32% wanting greater organisational recognition of the value of complaint handling resulting in greater autonomy to resolve complaints and influence business transformation.

For a consumer experience-focussed future, reliant on empathic human skills delivered by industry-qualified complaints handling teams, now is the time to build on the lessons drawn from royal commissions into consumer care, the quick pivot learnings to customer response through the pandemic; putting the interests of the customer first, building trust through engagement and product transparency, and support by an organisation that guarantees oversight and accountability.



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