

THE SILENT HOTEL GUEST

Why Some Travelers Walk Away Without Complaining—and What Hospitality Research Reveals About Consumer Behavior, Personal Dignity, and Opportunistic Complaints

A Hospitality Consumer Behavior White Paper

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Published by: Better Hotel Bureau (BHB)

For publication on: BetterHotelBureau.org and ManagersForum.org

October 2026



Executive Summary

One of the most expensive guests a hotel can lose may be the one who never complains.

This guest does not demand a refund. Does not threaten a one-star review. Does not ask for the manager. The guest simply leaves, carries every future booking to a competitor, and may never tell the hotel what went wrong.

Hospitality companies pour considerable time and money into managing complaints, answering online reviews, and negotiating compensation. Yet an entire segment of dissatisfied customers remains almost invisible to them.

These consumers choose silence for a variety of reasons. Some calculate that complaining costs more effort than the problem is worth. Others dislike confrontation, doubt that management will fix anything, or would simply rather spend their time elsewhere.

Some worry that a public complaint will make them look unreasonable, demanding, or opportunistic. Others regard chasing compensation for a minor inconvenience as beneath their own standards of fairness.

On the other side of the ledger, academic research has established that opportunistic complaints are real. Some consumers knowingly misrepresent service failures or pursue compensation they have not earned, forcing hotels into the uncomfortable business of separating legitimate grievances from questionable claims.

Put those behaviors together and a fundamental problem emerges:

The number of complaints a hotel receives is not a reliable measure of how many guests were dissatisfied—or how seriously they were affected.

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This white paper examines four interconnected bodies of research:

- **Exit, Voice, and Loyalty:** Why dissatisfied guests sometimes leave rather than try to fix the problem.
- **Non-Complaining Consumer Behavior:** Why legitimate dissatisfaction does not always produce a complaint.
- **Self-Presentation and Personal Dignity:** Why consumers may hold back criticism to protect their reputation or their personal standards.
- **Opportunistic Complaint Behavior:** Why some consumers deliberately exploit service failures and compensation policies.

Drawing on published academic research and firsthand hospitality experience, the paper traces how these behaviors shape hotel profitability, guest relationships, online reputation, and service recovery.

Its central recommendation is blunt:

Hospitality businesses must learn to listen beyond the complaint desk. At the same time, complaints must be judged on evidence, actual impact, and fairness—not on pressure, threats, or the volume of public criticism.

Why this matters to you: if your hotel measures guest satisfaction by counting complaints, you may be watching the wrong number while your most valuable customers quietly book somewhere else—and the refund you refused to pay may be the cheapest thing you lost.

1. The Guest Who Walked Away in Fifteen Minutes—and Never Said Why

A few years ago, I booked a hotel room for a single night before an early-morning flight.

I checked in late. Went upstairs. Opened the door, switched on the television, and kicked off my shoes.

The moment my bare feet touched the carpet, I felt something wrong.

I looked down.

Toenail clippings. Several of them, scattered across the carpet beside the bed.

The previous guest had evidently decided to trim his or her toenails right there, and housekeeping had failed to remove the evidence.

That was enough for me.

I put my shoes back on, gathered my belongings, and went back downstairs.

The front desk clerk—the same employee who had checked me in less than 15 minutes earlier—was sitting behind the counter, watching television.

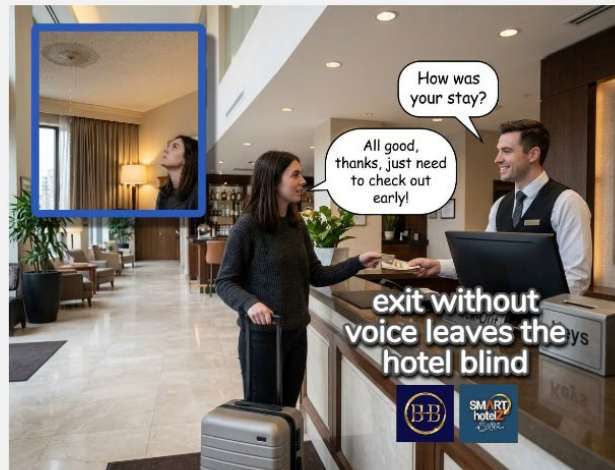
I told her I was checking out.

She did not ask why.

I did not explain. I did not ask for a refund.

I simply walked out, went to another hotel on the next block, and paid for a second room.

The unhappy customer who never complains doesn't argue, just leaves. He stops buying, ends the relationship, and takes the business to a competitor.



Why didn't I complain?

Because the decision had already been made.

The condition of that room was unacceptable to me. I had no interest in staying, even if the hotel had offered to clean the carpet or move me to another room.

Could I have demanded a refund? Certainly.

Would I have received one? Perhaps.

But what would that have accomplished?

Getting my money back would not have erased the experience. I might have spent another 20 minutes explaining myself, waiting for a manager, or haggling over the refund.

I had an early flight the next morning. My only priority was a clean, comfortable place to sleep.

The refund simply was not worth the additional aggravation.

This was not an isolated incident

Over the years, I have run into problems at hotels, restaurants, and other service businesses.

I have walked out of restaurants without touching the food—and without demanding a refund.

On another occasion, I returned a recreational vehicle that I had rented and paid for in full for an entire week, without asking for a dime in compensation.

Again and again, I have made a conscious calculation that pursuing a complaint would not improve my experience.

Sometimes I do try to offer constructive feedback.

When I notice something that deserves management's attention, I prefer to raise it privately rather than criticize the business in public.

I often open the conversation this way:

"This is not a complaint. I am not asking for anything. I simply wanted to bring this to your attention so the next guest does not have the same experience."

Even that approach can trigger a defensive reaction.

I have met employees who roll their eyes, or who seem to assume that any expression of dissatisfaction is merely the opening move in a campaign for a free room, a free meal, or a refund.

That reaction is a serious problem.

If a customer who explicitly says no compensation is being requested still runs into defensiveness, how many other customers eventually decide that saying nothing is easier?

And how much valuable operational intelligence is lost because businesses struggle to tell constructive feedback apart from a financial demand?

I have spent decades in the hospitality industry. I understand that mistakes happen. Equipment fails. Employees make errors. No hotel can promise a flawless experience every single day.

But understanding those realities does not mean accepting every service failure.

Nor does it mean every disappointing experience deserves a financial claim.

Sometimes, as a customer, I simply choose to leave.

These personal experiences are not scientific evidence of how most travelers behave. They do, however, illustrate a well-documented consumer-behavior phenomenon that researchers have studied for decades.

It has a name: **exit without voice**.

2. Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: When Walking Away Is Cheaper Than Speaking Up

The foundational theory: leave, or speak up

In 1970, economist Albert O. Hirschman published *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*.

Hirschman identified two fundamental responses to an organization's declining performance:

Exit: The dissatisfied consumer ends the relationship, stops buying, or defects to a competitor.

Voice: The dissatisfied consumer tries to fix the problem by communicating dissatisfaction or pressing for change.

Loyalty can influence which path the consumer takes—whether to leave, or to stay long enough to push for improvement.

Hirschman's framework applies broadly to organizations and markets. Its implications for hospitality, however, are especially sharp.

Hotels generally assume that a dissatisfied guest will report a problem if it is serious enough.

Hirschman's framework recognizes another possibility.

When leaving is easier than seeking a correction, the consumer may simply exit. The market renders its verdict, and nobody files a report.

Same dissatisfaction, four different responses

Consider a traveler who discovers that a hotel room is dirty.

The guest has several options.

One is to call the front desk and request another room.

Another is to demand a refund.

A third is to document the problem and publish a negative review.

A fourth is to leave the hotel, book a room elsewhere, and never return.

Each of these choices may reflect exactly the same level of dissatisfaction.

What differs is the customer's assessment of the available responses.

If the guest expects that complaining will mean needless conflict, wasted time, or an unsatisfying remedy, exit can become the rational choice.

In the experience described earlier, leaving meant crossing the street and buying another room.

The cost of switching hotels was low compared with the perceived effort of getting the problem fixed.

Why exit without voice leaves the hotel blind

A complaint, even an unpleasant one, hands management information.

The hotel learns that something went wrong.

Staff may get the chance to inspect the room, correct the issue, apologize, or prevent a recurrence.

A guest who simply leaves may provide none of that.

In my case, the front desk clerk knew I was leaving less than 15 minutes after check-in.

But because she did not ask why, and I did not volunteer the reason, the cause of my departure went unrecorded.

The hotel could have lost a future customer without ever understanding why.

Call it the **silent departure problem**.

Hotels routinely track occupancy, average daily rate, RevPAR, guest satisfaction scores, refund totals, and online reviews.

Few properties, however, systematically measure how many customers end the relationship because of an unsatisfactory experience that was never reported.

The \$3,750 question

A disputed refund may involve a relatively small sum.

The lifetime value of a lost customer can be considerably larger.

Suppose a guest normally stays five nights a year at a property, spending an average of \$150 per night.

That is \$750 in annual room revenue.

If that guest would otherwise have kept returning for five years, the potential room revenue tied to that one relationship comes to \$3,750—before accounting for operating expenses, profit margins, shifting travel patterns, or possible referrals.

This is an illustrative calculation, not an industry-wide estimate of lost customer value.

The financial lesson is plain: a hotel may keep the payment for one bad night while forfeiting a far more valuable future relationship.

A hotel can win the refund dispute and still lose the customer.

Research foundation

Hirschman, A. O. (1970). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Harvard University Press.

3. Silence Is Not Satisfaction: What the Research Says About Guests Who Never Complain

Dissatisfaction does not automatically produce a complaint

Consumer researchers have long recognized a stubborn fact: an unhappy customer is not necessarily a complaining customer.

Chebat, Davidow, and Codjovi (2005), in their study *Silent Voices: Why Some Dissatisfied Consumers Fail to Complain*, examined consumers who had experienced negative service incidents.

Their research highlighted the importance of *Seeking Redress Propensity*—an individual's general willingness to pursue corrective action.

They found that this tendency was strongly associated with whether a dissatisfied consumer actually complained.

The implication is significant:

Two consumers can experience the same problem yet respond differently, because their personal inclination to seek redress differs.

In another influential study, Stephens and Gwinner (1998) developed a cognitive-emotive model of complaint behavior.

Their work examined the role of emotional reactions and coping strategies after consumer dissatisfaction, identifying problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance responses.

That helps explain why avoiding any further involvement can be a deliberate response to an unpleasant service experience—not indifference, but a choice.

Hotels face a sharper version of the problem

Sherine Kwok's 2019 review, *Can't Complain? Factors Influencing Dissatisfied Customers' Non-Complaining Behaviour*, examined non-complaining behavior specifically in the hospitality context.

The review stressed that businesses should not read an absence of complaints as proof of satisfaction.

It also highlighted the possibility that dissatisfied customers may never voice their grievances at all—and may simply choose not to return.

That conclusion is especially relevant for hotels, where customers are often transient and may have little personal relationship with the property.

A traveler spending one night in an unfamiliar city may see little point in pursuing an issue after checkout.

Six reasons guests stay silent

Research suggests that non-complaining behavior can spring from several distinct motivations.

3.1 The expected remedy is not worth the effort

The customer judges that the time, inconvenience, and emotional energy needed to pursue a complaint outweigh the likely payoff.

A \$20 adjustment may mean nothing to a traveler already juggling a demanding schedule.

3.2 The customer expects little benefit

Some guests doubt that hotel employees will take their concerns seriously.

They may anticipate an apology with no corrective action, an argument over who is responsible, or a request to repeat the whole story to several employees in succession.

3.3 The customer dislikes confrontation

Complaining requires one person to confront another with a perceived failure.

Some consumers find that genuinely uncomfortable, even when they are convinced their complaint is entirely legitimate.

3.4 The problem seems relatively minor

Travelers differ in their expectations and in their tolerance for inconvenience.

A broken television, a late breakfast, or a temporary elevator interruption may be unacceptable to one guest and a shrug to another.

3.5 The customer has already found another solution

A guest who leaves for another hotel may consider the matter closed.

Once the immediate problem has been solved by switching providers, seeking compensation from the original business can seem pointless.

3.6 The customer wants to avoid being seen in a negative light

Some guests are reluctant to appear demanding or unreasonable.

This motivation overlaps with research on self-presentation and social-image concerns, explored in the next section.

The complaint log is a self-selected sample

Hotels receive feedback from the people willing to give it.

They may receive nothing comparable from guests who quietly tolerate a problem, leave early, or decide not to come back.

As a result, complaint statistics suffer from **self-selection bias**.

The people who appear in a complaint log are not necessarily representative of the entire customer population.

That does not make complaints unreliable or unimportant.

It means management should stop treating complaint volume as a complete measure of service quality.

Research foundation

Chebat, J.-C., Davidow, M., & Cudjovi, I. (2005). *Silent Voices: Why Some Dissatisfied Consumers Fail to Complain*. Journal of Service Research.

Stephens, N., & Gwinner, K. P. (1998). *Why Don't Some People Complain? A Cognitive-Emotive Process Model of Consumer Complaint Behavior*. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science.

Kwok, S. (2019). *Can't Complain? Factors Influencing Dissatisfied Customers' Non-Complaining Behaviour*. New Vistas.

4. Self-Presentation and Personal Dignity: Why Some Guests Would Rather Stay Quiet Than Look Petty

Every complaint is also a statement about the person making it

Consumer behavior is shaped not only by money but by psychological and social forces.

People generally want to maintain a favorable image of themselves.

They want to be seen as reasonable, courteous, fair-minded, independent, and considerate.

A public complaint can pit the desire to hold a business accountable against the desire to protect that image.

A guest may be convinced a hotel delivered poor service yet hesitate before posting a critical review.

The guest may wonder:

Will this make me look unreasonable?

Will people think I am impossible to please?

Will the complaint make me look petty?

Will readers assume I am angling for something free?

These concerns fall squarely within the study of *self-presentation* and *impression management*.

2026 evidence: new reviewers pull their punches

Solinas, Valsesia, Nunes, and Ordanini published *Starting Positive: The Impact of Self-Presentation Concerns on Consumer Reviews* in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

The researchers analyzed reviewing behavior on Yelp and TripAdvisor and ran controlled laboratory studies.

They found that consumers were less inclined to publish negative reviews early in their review history, because they feared appearing less warm or likable.

As reviewers built up a longer record of publicly associated reviews, that reluctance faded.

The research found that concern about appearing unkind helped explain the pattern.

This is an important development for anyone trying to interpret online hotel reviews.

It demonstrates that some consumers withhold negative feedback because of what criticism might do to their personal image.

In other words, a review reflects more than the underlying customer experience.

It can also reflect the reviewer's effort to manage how other people see them.

Public identity suppresses complaints

Dyussebayeva, Viglia, Nieto-Garcia, and Invernizzi (2020) investigated how public self-disclosure affects online complaint behavior.

Their study, published in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, found that publicly disclosing one's identity could discourage complaints by generating feelings of vulnerability.

The researchers suggested that better confidentiality could encourage some dissatisfied customers to come forward.

That matters enormously in an era when public reviews may be tied to real names, personal photographs, social-media profiles, and a permanent online record.

The social consequences of complaining can now reach well beyond the immediate exchange with the hotel.

A guest who wants to avoid public conflict may simply say nothing.

Some consumers refrain from complaining not because they fear public judgment, but because they personally believe pursuing compensation would be inappropriate.



Personal dignity: restraint that has nothing to do with an audience

There is a further distinction worth drawing.

Some consumers refrain from complaining not because they fear public judgment, but because they personally believe pursuing compensation would be inappropriate.

A guest might, for example, experience a modest inconvenience and conclude that demanding a full refund would be excessive.

Even if the hotel would cheerfully issue the refund, the customer may decline it.

That decision may reflect a personal standard of fairness.

It can be understood in relation to *moral identity*—the importance individuals place on moral characteristics as part of their self-concept.

The existing research, however, does not establish how often hotel guests refuse to complain specifically because they do not want to appear opportunistic, or because they consider such behavior inconsistent with their values.

That narrower question remains a research hypothesis.

Restraint is not silence, and a complaint is not greed

A guest who refrains from an unjustified compensation claim is not necessarily a guest who refrains from reporting legitimate concerns.

A principled traveler may regard flagging a safety hazard, an inaccessible facility, or a serious housekeeping failure as a genuine responsibility.

Likewise, a guest who seeks compensation for an actual loss is not necessarily acting selfishly.

The ethical question is not whether a person complains.

It is whether the complaint accurately reflects the experience—and whether the remedy requested is proportionate and justified.

There is dignity in exercising restraint, but there is no dishonor in making a legitimate complaint.

Research foundation

Solinas, E., Valsesia, F., Nunes, J. C., & Ordanini, A. (2026). *Starting Positive: The Impact of Self-Presentation Concerns on Consumer Reviews*. Journal of Consumer Research.

Dyussebayeva, S., Viglia, G., Nieto-Garcia, M., & Invernizzi, A. C. (2020). *It Makes Me Feel Vulnerable! The Impact of Public Self-Disclosure on Online Complaint Behavior*. International Journal of Hospitality Management.

5. Opportunistic Complaints: When the Refund Becomes the Point

Legitimate complaints deserve a real remedy

Hotels must take genuine complaints seriously. Full stop.

Guests buy accommodation with reasonable expectations about cleanliness, safety, service, and access to advertised facilities.

When those expectations go unmet, a hotel may need to fix the problem, apologize, provide an alternative service, or offer compensation.

A reasonable service-recovery program is not merely an expense line.

It is part of responsible hospitality management.

Hospitality researchers have nonetheless documented cases in which customers knowingly exploit the complaint process.

Opportunism requires knowing misrepresentation

An opportunistic complaint involves deliberate misrepresentation, fabrication, or exploitation of a service failure to secure an undeserved advantage.

The distinction matters.

A guest who sincerely believes a serious inconvenience warrants a refund is not necessarily opportunistic.

A guest who negotiates hard for compensation is not automatically dishonest.

Even a guest whose demand management ultimately rejects may have a legitimate grievance.

Opportunism requires more than a disagreement over what the compensation should be worth.

It requires an element of knowing misrepresentation or improper exploitation.

346 incidents: the behavior is real, but its scale is unmeasured

Ro and Wong (2012), in *Customer Opportunistic Complaints Management: A Critical Incident Approach*, investigated 346 incidents from hotel and restaurant services.

The researchers examined how service employees handled opportunistic complaints, classifying incidents by available evidence, compensation, employee response, follow-up, and other characteristics.

Their research documented that knowingly illegitimate customer complaints do occur in hospitality settings.

The study did not establish what percentage of all hotel complaints are fraudulent.

That distinction matters, because the existence of opportunistic behavior does not justify treating every dissatisfied customer as a suspect.

Policy design can invite—or deter—bad claims

Baker, Magnini, and Perdue (2012), in *Opportunistic Customer Complaining: Causes, Consequences, and Managerial Alternatives*, reviewed the research on opportunistic complaints in hospitality.

Their analysis considered customer characteristics, business characteristics, and the relationship between customers and service providers.

Incentives matter. A hotel may inadvertently encourage unjustified compensation claims if its procedures teach guests that forceful demands or public threats automatically produce financial rewards.

Conversely, excessively restrictive refund policies may discourage legitimate guests from reporting service failures at all.

Management must balance those competing risks.

Character matters, not just the size of the payout

Wirtz and Kum (2004), in *Consumer Cheating on Service Guarantees*, examined dishonest claiming behavior.

Their research found that stronger morality, greater satisfaction, and intentions to purchase again were associated with less cheating under the study conditions.

Importantly, greater potential material gain did not consistently increase cheating across the studies.

The results suggest that dishonest consumer behavior cannot be explained by the dollar amount on the table alone.

Individual values, relationships, and situational conditions also matter.

These findings reinforce the distinction between consumers who see compensation as an opportunity and those who first ask whether requesting it is ethically justified.

Test case: the two-hour elevator outage

Consider a hotel hosting a group during a two-hour elevator outage.

Some guests suffer considerable disruption. They report the problem, and management provides an agreed remedy.

Other members of the group later learn that compensation was issued.

They request identical refunds, despite experiencing little or no disruption.

The hotel now faces a hard question: Does consistent treatment require identical compensation?

Not necessarily.

Fairness requires weighing the actual circumstances of each guest.

A traveler with limited mobility who could not reach essential facilities may have endured substantial hardship.

Another guest who was delayed repeatedly may also have suffered meaningful inconvenience.

A guest who experienced no material disruption may not have the same basis for compensation.

Still, asking for an identical refund does not automatically prove dishonesty. The guest may sincerely—but mistakenly—believe that everyone in the group is entitled to the same remedy.

Hotels should therefore distinguish among **unsupported claims, unreasonable demands, and knowingly dishonest complaints**.

Those are not interchangeable categories.

Fair compensation should depend on justified circumstances—not on who demands it most aggressively.

Research foundation

Ro, H., & Wong, J. (2012). *Customer Opportunistic Complaints Management: A Critical Incident Approach*. International Journal of Hospitality Management.

Baker, M. A., Magnini, V. P., & Perdue, R. R. (2012). *Opportunistic Customer Complaining: Causes, Consequences, and Managerial Alternatives*. International Journal of Hospitality Management.

Wirtz, J., & Kum, D. (2004). *Consumer Cheating on Service Guarantees*. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science.

Can repeated exposure to aggressive compensation demands condition employees to treat ordinary feedback as an impending confrontation?



6. The Employee Who Hears Every Concern as a Demand

One of the most overlooked variables in guest complaint behavior may be the employee's very first reaction.

In my own travels, I have often tried to flag potential service problems privately and constructively.

Even when I state outright that I am not complaining and not requesting compensation, employees sometimes respond defensively.

That experience raises a management question worth asking:

Can repeated exposure to aggressive compensation demands condition employees to treat ordinary feedback as an impending confrontation?

The question deserves research, not assumptions.

Hospitality employees routinely deal with disappointed customers, demanding travelers, billing disputes, and emotionally charged situations.

Under those conditions, defensive communication habits may take root.

This paper does not claim, however, that opportunistic complaints are the proven cause of employee defensiveness, or that defensive reactions are widespread across the industry.

The practical risk is nevertheless clear.

When employees respond badly to feedback, they may discourage guests from sharing information that could help the business.

A guest who mentions a maintenance issue may not want compensation.

A guest who points out a housekeeping lapse may simply want the next arrival to have a better stay.

A restaurant patron who flags a problem with food preparation may be handing the kitchen a chance to correct a recurring defect.

None of these interactions should automatically be treated as a refund negotiation.

Training priority: listen first, negotiate later

Frontline employees should learn to separate the conversation into three distinct stages:

First: Listen.

Understand what the guest is reporting, without presuming the guest's motive.

Second: Investigate or acknowledge.

Determine whether the reported problem calls for immediate correction, further review, or management attention.

Third: Discuss remedies when appropriate.

Compensation should be considered only in the context of the actual issue and the guest's circumstances.

A guest who is not asking for a refund should not be treated as though a confrontation is inevitable.

A simple, sincere acknowledgment may encourage future feedback—and deliver valuable operational intelligence at no cost.

7. The Online Review Paradox: Who Is Actually in the Sample?

Online reviews are central to modern hospitality.

Travelers rely on them to judge cleanliness, service quality, reliability, amenities, and overall value.

Hotels rely on them to spot recurring problems, monitor guest sentiment, and evaluate management performance.

But online reviews are voluntary.

They are not representative surveys of every guest who stayed at a property.

That creates a serious methodological limitation.

The silent dissatisfied guest

Some dissatisfied guests never publish a negative review.

They may feel vulnerable, prefer discretion, dislike confrontation, or decide the extra effort is not worth it.

The self-presentation research demonstrates that concern about appearing unkind can suppress negative reviewing behavior.

The vocal dissatisfied guest

Other customers report problems readily.

Their feedback may be entirely legitimate and highly valuable.

Still, a willingness to complain should not be confused with the severity of dissatisfaction.

The opportunistic claimant

A third category consists of customers who knowingly misrepresent problems or pursue undeserved compensation.

Hospitality research confirms this behavior exists, but the available evidence does not establish that such consumers account for a large share of negative online reviews.

These differences open the door to selection bias in online review systems.

The direction and magnitude of that bias, however, cannot be assumed to be the same across every property or platform.

Some review systems may underrepresent dissatisfied guests who dislike public criticism.

Other circumstances may encourage unusually motivated dissatisfied customers to post.

What operators should measure alongside reviews

Guest reviews should be evaluated together with:

- Internal maintenance and service-failure records.
- Housekeeping inspection results.
- Confidential post-stay feedback.
- Repeat-guest and retention trends.
- Early-departure patterns and room-change requests.
- Complaint-resolution outcomes.
- Objective operating and brand-quality standards.

A guest satisfaction score is a useful indicator.

It is not a complete explanation of the guest experience.

The objective should be to understand what guests experienced—not merely to count what they said.

**The Better Hotel Bureau
Approach: Constructive
Feedback Without the Fight
or Public Exposure**



8. The Better Hotel Bureau Approach: Constructive Feedback Without the Fight or Public Exposure

The research examined in this paper points to a practical opportunity for the hospitality industry.

Guest feedback should be easier to deliver privately, and hotels should get a meaningful chance to investigate legitimate concerns before disagreements escalate needlessly.

Better Hotel Bureau advocates respectful communication and constructive resolution between hotel guests and hotel operators.

Its underlying philosophy aligns with several of the findings discussed here.

Some guests dislike confrontation.

Others are reluctant to attach their identities to public criticism.

Still others are willing to offer helpful feedback but have no interest in demanding compensation.

A private feedback channel gives these people an alternative.

Private feedback: a channel for the guest who would otherwise say nothing

A traveler should be able to tell a hotel that a room was not properly cleaned without being treated as though a refund demand is coming.

A guest should be able to flag a maintenance concern without having to publish a negative review.

A hotel should have the opportunity to investigate the facts and take corrective action.

And where a legitimate service failure justifies compensation, the remedy should rest on the actual circumstances.

Private communication can serve all of these objectives.

Privacy, however, must not be confused with secrecy or suppression.

Guests retain every right to publish truthful reviews, contact consumer-protection agencies, and pursue applicable legal remedies.

Serious matters involving safety, accessibility, discrimination, or other legal obligations demand appropriate action regardless of whether the guest seeks a private resolution.

Two legitimate interests, one shared dependency

A fair system must recognize two legitimate interests.

The guest's interest: Receiving the service purchased, being treated with respect, and obtaining an appropriate remedy when the hotel fails to meet its obligations.

The hotel's interest: Investigating allegations objectively, correcting genuine problems, and avoiding compensation based solely on unsupported accusations or coercive pressure.

These interests are not inherently opposed.

Both depend on accurate information and fair treatment.

BHB's broader value lies in encouraging dialogue before avoidable disputes harden into public confrontations.

Its potential effectiveness should be judged by measurable results, including complaint-resolution quality, guest satisfaction, and participation by previously silent customers.

9. Ten Recommendations for Hotel Owners and Managers

The academic literature and operational experience point toward a more effective approach to guest relations.

9.1 Treat silence as a warning sign, not a satisfaction score

A hotel with few complaints may well deliver excellent service.

But low complaint volume alone does not prove it.

Managers should actively seek feedback from guests who never raised a concern during their stay.

9.2 Make private feedback effortless

Hotels should provide convenient, confidential channels for reporting service problems.

A QR code, a short post-stay survey, or a direct private feedback form can cut the effort required.

Guests should be able to share observations without having to seek compensation or speak publicly.

9.3 Separate constructive feedback from financial demands

Employees should not assume that reporting a problem means requesting a refund.

The immediate objective is to understand and correct the issue.

Compensation can be handled separately, when appropriate.

9.4 Ask why guests leave unexpectedly

When a guest checks out shortly after arrival, staff should respectfully ask whether something about the stay prompted the departure.

The guest must be free not to answer.

The purpose is not to pressure a dissatisfied customer into staying.

It is to identify problems while there is still a window to investigate.

9.5 Record failures even when nobody complains

Maintenance and operational records should capture confirmed equipment failures and service interruptions independently of guest complaints.

A malfunctioning elevator is still a problem even if no guest asks for compensation.

9.6 Use consistent, evidence-based compensation standards

Hotels should weigh the severity, duration, actual impact, relevant service commitments, and legal obligations associated with a failure.

Comparable circumstances deserve consistent treatment.

Different circumstances may justify different remedies.

9.7 Reward legitimate harm, not pressure

The loudest guest should not automatically walk away with the largest refund.

A fair policy keeps threats and intimidation from displacing objective evaluation.

At the same time, hotels must never penalize guests for reporting genuine problems or making lawful demands.

9.8 Monitor customer loss—not just refund expense

Operators should examine repeat business, early departures, unresolved complaints, and signs of silent dissatisfaction.

Saving a \$150 refund may be worth little if poor handling permanently damages a profitable customer relationship.

9.9 Train employees to welcome useful information

An employee who receives a report should understand that the guest may be handing the business valuable insight.

A courteous acknowledgment is usually more productive than defensiveness.

9.10 Measure the reasons behind silence

Post-stay surveys should ask whether a guest experienced an issue that went unreported and, where appropriate, why.

That information can help distinguish genuine satisfaction from resignation, avoidance, distrust, or reluctance to appear unreasonable.

10. A Research Proposal: Testing the Personal Dignity Hypothesis

Four bodies of established research lay the groundwork for a more targeted hospitality study.

Hirschman's framework explains why consumers may exit rather than push for change.

Research on non-complaining behavior demonstrates that dissatisfaction does not automatically produce a complaint.

Self-presentation research shows that concerns about appearing unkind or unlikable can discourage negative public reviews.

Research on opportunistic complaints and consumer cheating shows that ethical standards and situational influences shape compensation-seeking behavior.

But one specific question remains open:

How many dissatisfied hotel guests avoid complaining because they do not want to be seen—by others or by themselves—as demanding, opportunistic, or unfair?

This paper proposes the following hypothesis:

Hotel guests who place greater importance on personal dignity, fairness, and social reputation may be less likely to complain publicly or pursue compensation for minor service failures when they perceive that doing so could conflict with their personal standards or damage how others perceive them.

The proposed effect should be examined separately from other drivers of non-complaining behavior, including time constraints, avoidance of confrontation, bad experiences with previous complaints, and lack of confidence in management.

A possible research design

A hospitality study could present travelers with standardized service-failure scenarios involving dirty rooms, delayed check-in, unavailable amenities, temporary elevator outages, and service mistakes.

The scenarios would vary by:

- Severity and actual personal impact.
- Availability of alternative accommodations.
- Financial value of potential compensation.
- Whether the complaint would be public or private.
- Whether the guest's identity would be disclosed.
- Whether the guest genuinely experienced the problem.
- Whether other customers had already received compensation.

Participants would then indicate whether they would report the issue, request compensation, post a public review, leave without explanation, or remain silent.

Researchers could also assess moral identity, concern about social judgment, and general complaint propensity.

Such a study could determine whether personal dignity and the fear of appearing opportunistic explain a measurable share of guest silence.

Until that research is done, the prevalence of this behavior should not be presented as an established industry statistic.

11. Conclusion: The Guest Who Says Nothing May Be Telling Us the Most

Hospitality businesses devote enormous attention to dissatisfied customers who complain.

That attention is justified.

Legitimate complaints help businesses identify failures, improve service, and preserve customer relationships.

But there is another population of dissatisfied guests whose experiences may never show up in a complaint log or an online review.

Some stay silent because they dislike confrontation.

Others believe complaining will accomplish nothing.

Some decide that the effort of chasing a refund is not worth the potential return.

Others hesitate to criticize a business publicly because they do not want to look unreasonable, demanding, or opportunistic.

And some simply take their business elsewhere.

My own experiences have driven this lesson home.

I have walked out of hotels and restaurants without asking for compensation—not because the service failures were acceptable, but because I had concluded that pursuing the matter would add little value.

On other occasions, I have tried to offer constructive feedback without asking for anything in return, only to meet reactions suggesting the employee was bracing for yet another compensation demand.

These experiences highlight an important distinction.

A guest who does not complain is not necessarily satisfied. A guest who complains is not necessarily unreasonable. And a guest who requests compensation is not necessarily opportunistic.

Every complaint deserves an objective assessment.

Every confirmed service failure deserves appropriate attention.

And every business should recognize that the quiet departure of a dissatisfied customer can carry greater consequences than a noisy refund dispute.

Hospitality should not degenerate into a contest between demanding customers and defensive businesses.

It should remain a relationship grounded in service, accountability, personal responsibility, and fairness.

Better Hotel Bureau advocates a hospitality environment in which legitimate guests are heard, hotels get the opportunity to resolve problems constructively, and complaints are judged by what actually happened.

The most useful question for hotel management may no longer be simply:

How many complaints did we receive?

It may be:

How many dissatisfied guests never told us why they left?

Because sometimes the most damaging review is the one that was never written.

The guest simply never comes back.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do dissatisfied hotel guests sometimes leave without complaining?

Some judge that the likely payoff from complaining does not justify the time and effort. Others dislike confrontation, doubt that management will resolve the issue, or simply prefer to switch to another hotel.

What is exit without voice in hospitality?

Exit without voice occurs when a dissatisfied guest leaves, or stops buying from a hotel, without trying to correct the underlying problem through a complaint. The concept derives from Albert O. Hirschman's work on consumer responses to organizational decline.

Are guests who complain online necessarily more dissatisfied?

No. Research shows that complaint behavior depends on factors beyond dissatisfaction, including personality, complaint propensity, perceived vulnerability, and social-image concerns.

Why might a guest avoid posting a negative hotel review?

Some consumers fear that negative reviews will make them look unpleasant or unkind. Others are uncomfortable attaching their identity, in public, to criticism or confrontation.

What are opportunistic hotel complaints?

They are knowingly false, misleading, or improperly exploitative claims intended to secure undeserved benefits. A legitimate complaint or a firm request for compensation is not automatically opportunistic.

Should hotels compensate every guest for an inconvenience?

Not automatically. Appropriate compensation depends on the service failure, its actual consequences, applicable obligations, hotel policies, and each guest's circumstances.

Can hotels lose customers without ever receiving a complaint?

Yes. Consumer-behavior research recognizes exit as an alternative to complaint or corrective action. A dissatisfied customer may switch providers without ever communicating the reason.

How can hotels identify silent dissatisfaction?

Hotels can combine confidential post-stay surveys, early-departure inquiries, incident records, repeat-guest analysis, and operational inspections.

Why is private hotel feedback important?

Private feedback gives travelers an alternative to public criticism and may encourage those uncomfortable with confrontation or identity disclosure to report problems.

What is Better Hotel Bureau?

Better Hotel Bureau is a hospitality guest-feedback and resolution initiative that promotes respectful communication, fair investigation, and constructive resolution between travelers and hotels.

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About Better Hotel Bureau

Better Hotel Bureau (BHB) is an initiative dedicated to encouraging fair, respectful communication between hotel guests and hospitality businesses.

Its approach emphasizes legitimate guest concerns, private feedback, objective evaluation, and constructive resolution.

Website: <https://BetterHotelBureau.org>

About ManagersForum.org

ManagersForum.org is a professional forum serving hotel managers and hospitality professionals, encouraging the exchange of management knowledge, operational experience, and practical industry insights.

Website: <https://ManagersForum.org>

Research and editorial disclosure: This white paper is an original analytical synthesis of published academic literature and firsthand personal experiences. It is not a newly conducted empirical study. Personal accounts are illustrative, hypothetical scenarios are identified as such, and research hypotheses are distinguished from established findings.

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EDITOR'S NOTE — NOT PART OF THE WHITE PAPER (delete before publishing)

What changed: Prose was tightened to Vasseghy Style throughout; grammar and consistency corrected. Section and sub-section headings were rewritten to state a claim (numbering and order unchanged). A one-line "Why this matters to you" box was added after the Executive Summary. Length was preserved—the rewritten paper is slightly longer than v2.

What did not change: Every fact, figure, citation, argument, hedge and conclusion; the title, subtitle and byline; the full Scholarly References list, the About sections, the disclosure and the copyright line are reproduced exactly as in v2.

Please verify before publication:

- Solinas, Valsesia, Nunes & Ordanini (2026), *Journal of Consumer Research* 53(2), 305–322, DOI 10.1093/jcr/ucaf065 — volume, issue, pages and DOI could not be independently confirmed here; check against the journal page.
- Ro & Wong (2012) — the figure of 346 critical incidents should be checked against the article's method section.
- Kwok (2019), *New Vistas* 5(2), 4–7 — confirm the issue and page range against the UWL repository record.
- Section 4 subheading "2026 evidence: new reviewers pull their punches" paraphrases the Solinas et al. finding (reluctance is strongest early in a reviewer's history). Adjust if you prefer a more literal label.