

What To Do When A Retail Problem Occurs

In this article, I'd like to make some suggestions about what to do when the purchase of a product goes wrong somehow. At some time or another, we've all tried to order a product where *something* went wrong in the process - maybe the product was backordered, perhaps the wrong item was shipped, the invoice was wrong, etc. While it can be difficult to obtain satisfaction, there are some specific actions and methods you can use to at least improve your chances of arriving at a more favorable outcome.

I'd like to illustrate some of these by telling you about a recent story that happened to me personally. After my story, I'll outline some specific steps you should take to resolve a problem, and use the specific examples from my case to show exactly what I mean.

On Monday, September 30th, Outcast (yes, here at our very own Monster-Hardware) gave me a call; he let me know that [Outpost](#) had placed some Intel Celeron 900Mhz retail boxed processors up for sale at \$9.90 each. Obviously, this was a great deal! I occasionally build simple computers for friends, family, etc. and thought that having one or two of these on the shelf wouldn't be a bad idea since I had a couple of builds coming up.

So... I got out my trusty credit card and went on over to the Outpost website. Once I found the 900Mhz Celerons, I placed two in my "shopping cart" and checked out. A few minutes later, I received an email confirming my order. Unfortunately, I received another email perhaps four hours later from the service department at Outpost informing me that my order had been cancelled. Their email said that it had "been removed from your order per your request to Customer Service or because the item is no longer available from the manufacturer." Well, I knew that I had certainly NOT cancelled my order. Furthermore, I reasoned that Outpost would not have allowed me to go through the checkout procedure if they were out of stock. This did not make sense to me, so I decided to call their customer service department.

When I called 877-688-7678 (the customer support number specified in the cancellation email), I eventually spoke with Pat - one of their customer support technicians. He cordially informed me that his computer indicated that they were indeed out of stock on the Celerons (not a big surprise at \$9.90 each!). After I asked why I was allowed to go through checkout and confirmation if they did not have the items in stock, I was told that the customer support technicians did not know how Outpost ordering system actually worked. Another technician (Mark) told me that I should not have been allowed to go through the checkout procedure since that product web pages were taken down and links disabled when items went out of stock. Both of them agreed that my personal credit card and other information should not have been accepted if the purchase checkout was not valid.

At this point, I decided to speak with a supervisor in my efforts to speak with some one who could give me a plausible answer. I spoke with Stacy, one of the Customer Support Supervisors. I asked her that Outpost provide me with an alternative; after haggling a bit, she offered to let me have two new 1Ghz Celerons at \$25 each with free shipping. I politely declined this offer; after all, why should I accept a very marginal increase in performance with 2-1/2 times the cost? More importantly, Outpost had indicated their willingness to "deal."

After further escalation, I spoke with multiple Fry's Customer Support Service staff in California (Fry's owns Outpost). I eventually spoke with Rob Winters - the overall manager at Outpost. Ironically, if I had only known his name and asked for him upon connecting to the Outpost service number, I could have solved my problem much faster. Like the Mel Gibson character says in the movie "Payback," if you go high enough in the chain of command, you can always speak to one person with enough authority to make a decision one way or the other. Rob Winters is that person for Outpost.

Rob was gracious enough to try and find me two 900Mhz Celerons within the Fry's system, but there was

none in stock. Two days later, he eventually agreed to sell me two 1Ghz Celerons at the same original price. Unfortunately, when I received my shipment, there was only one Celeron in the box. Mr. Winters declined to send me the rest of the order when I called back. At least I did receive at least one 1Ghz Intel Celeron retail box for \$9.90 plus \$5.00 shipping, so I at least see my efforts as successful even if only partially so. (Editors note; I have blocked out personal details)



Now, that's only one story of my recent success involving an Outpost order. There have certainly been many other problems I've faced. Let's outline some general principles and methodology that you can use when you are not satisfied with an order. I'll use some specific examples to illustrate these principles.

1) **Be polite.** I spoke with quite a few Outpost employees - to their credit, everyone I spoke with was cordial, professional, and spoke in a straightforward manner. I can at least respect this attitude by their employees; displaying an irate attitude or anger to someone who is treating you professionally can only harm your cause.

2) **Be prepared.** Take notes and lots of them, on each and every call you make. Do not delete or discard your emails, but save them in a special folder instead. I would suggest that you print out copies and have them in front of you before you make any calls, and take your notes directly on them. Document, document, document. Think through your arguments and decide the desired resolution; this is your goal to shoot for.

3) **Be persistent.** I eventually spoke with nine different Outpost or Fry's employees (and several of these involved multiple conversations) before I finally got in touch with the one person with the authority to make a decision. If done politely, you should never fear to ask for an employee's name or employee number and who their supervisor is and how to contact them. Continue to escalate requests. Keep in mind that many lower level employees truly do not have the authority to give instant resolution. In all manner of communications, phone calls are better than emails. Be willing to tell people *"...just put me on hold while you get your supervisor - I am unable to be called back at my location."*

4) **Be progressive.** Offer alternative solutions. Once I found out that Outpost was truly out of stock and that Intel has ceased production on the product according to Outpost, I offered them the following options:

- a) place me on backorder and keep the order open (I could wait)
- b) substitute with an alternate product (I'd have been just as happy with a Duron 900Mhz at \$10 each)
- c) substitute with another version (I was willing to accept an OEM package instead of retail box at that price)
- d) substitute another level of product at an equitable price (which I eventually received)
- e) be willing to offer specific feedback and customer care suggestions about your experience
- (I did so by submitting a detailed list of suggestions to [Rob Winters](#))

5) **Be patient.** Be prepared for this to take a while. As you push things up the ladder, it may become increasingly more difficult to reach decision makers. Be prepared for possible defeat; you will NOT win EVERY battle you have. Make you success an internal point of principle that you are right and they are wrong.

6) **Be punitive.** Let me state that I am not an advocate of blackmail or extortion! However, you must find a way to make the decision maker aware of the possible cost of not solving your problem. I certainly made an effort to let Mr. Winters know that I had spent far more than \$9.90 in toll free calls to their customer support phone line - not to mention that resolving this problem had taken away from his personal management role as well needlessly tying up his staff. Outpost could have avoided these costs by offering the eventual solution immediately and EVERYONE would have been a lot happier. I also let them know that as a concerned customer, I probably would not be doing any further business with Outpost.

In conclusion, the next time you have a problem with an order from a retailer or vendor - perhaps even **YOUR** Outpost Celeron order! - follow the principles and methodology listed above to attempt a resolution. You will find that your success rate in dealing with these types of problems will rise. Retailers and vendors will improve their customer service function only when enough disappointed customers get the message to them about the true importance of customer satisfaction.

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