

UPSTART
JO UCUKALO**The fix is in**

Resolving customer complaints might seem like a hard way to make a dollar, but one firm is making a real fist of it.

STORY CAROLYN BOYD

Jo Ucakalo never intended to make a career of complaints resolution. But, after completing two degrees and working in a variety of careers including as a civil engineer and flight attendant, the 32-year-old discovered she was surprisingly skilled at it.

Then, when a few favours that involved helping disgruntled friends to get refunds turned into assisting friends of friends sort out the problems they were having, the Brisbane resident realised she might be on to something.

"I did some research on the complaints market, which is actually massive and relatively untapped," Ucakalo says. Nearly three years later, she has built a business out of complaining – aptly named Handle My Complaint. Widespread interest in the offering has led to rapid growth and the entrepreneur now has six staff, half of whom are full-time. "We're probably handling about two to three times as many complaints per month as we were last year," she says.

The business has resolved 2000 complaints, sorting out everything from a refund for a defunct hair straightener to an A\$85,000 reduction in early termination fees on a fixed-interest home loan.

In general, businesses respond well to being approached by a professional complaints firm that can provide the facts of a customer's gripe in a concise, high-level manner. "We're not pointing fingers, we are trying to resolve a dispute between two parties to make them happy," Ucakalo says. "We don't name and shame."

Some consumers are even prepared to incur a loss to have their complaint resolved. While Ucakalo charges a minimum A\$100 plus GST, the smallest amount Handle My Complaint has settled has been for A\$65. Most complaints she sees, though, have a potential result worth A\$200-plus in goods, vouchers or cash.

Ucakalo has plans to broaden her offering – and income stream – by expanding from helping disgruntled customers to consulting with companies on how to manage and resolve disputes properly.

"Moving into consultancy will make us more profitable and we can effect greater improvements in the process," she says. "It's only marginally profitable working on the consumer side. Revenue is slightly above expenses in what is a really labour-intensive task."

Software is also being designed to help businesses interact with consumers and manage complaints. "That will completely change the revenue model for our business," says Ucakalo, who



has a Bachelor of Civil Engineering from the Queensland University of Technology and a Bachelor of Financial Administration from the University of New England in New South Wales.

She expects much of her business growth to derive from the telco, banking and energy industries: "We'll work with them to reduce the number of complaints and they will then see a reduction in the number of complaints to the ombudsman – which is a really good way to quantify our value."

According to Ucakalo, gripes have two main causes. "Essentially, it comes down to poor communication and failure to deliver what's promised or expected to customers."

About 70 per cent of the complaints that Ucakalo's company handles are resolved. She is confident of increasing that to 90 per cent as more companies become used to dealing with a complaints-handling firm.

As for being a "professional whinger", Ucakalo has a little saying: "A whinge is when you're just airing a grievance. A complaint is when you want a result." ■