

FOREIGN AUTO COMPANIES

Taking Us for a Ride?

How proactively customer-friendly are international auto companies in India? How receptive are they to specific customer complaints? Do they treat their customers in the developed and developing countries alike? While a detailed answer to these questions will need extensive research, here is one case study, pertaining to Volkswagen (VW), India.



A customer sent his VW Passat, purchased in Hyderabad, for its first service (incidentally, a fully paid service, including the labour charges). At this point, a big air bubble on one of the tyres was brought to the attention of the service centre, who took some pictures of the tyres, promising to confirm if the tyre could be replaced under the warranty. Tyres, incidentally, were not among the exclusions in the warranty clause. When the centre did not revert, the customer emailed the customer service department, but received no response. When the customer, finally, managed to contact the manager of the service centre, he was told that the tyres were made by Pirelli and so the customer should complain to Pirelli Tyres!

The customer pointed out that he had purchased a VW car with Pirelli

tyres attached and not vice-versa and that it was absurd to ask him to chase Pirelli. After another delay of a few days, he was informed that Pirelli Tyres had refused to own up a manufacturing defect and, hence, the tyre did not have warranty cover. However, as a special gesture, they offered a discount of 25% on the Rs17,000 retail price of the tyre.

The customer argued that the car had met with no accident and, hence, he couldn't lodge an insurance claim. So where was the rationale for him to pay 70% of the cost of something for which he certainly was not responsible? He was told that the bubble may be a result of Indian road conditions. Maybe. But shouldn't cars purchased in India have Indian-roadworthy tyres? What if the bubble bursts when driving on a highway at high speed?

The customer offered a reasonable compromise—since 50,000km is a reasonable life expectancy of a tyre, and as this one had done 15,000km, a 30% charge from him for a replacement would be fair. But VW did not relent. The customer then emailed the CEO of VW, India, apprising him of the situation. Receiving no response, he sent a reminder four days later and still received no response. For good measure, the customer sent him a video link in which an unhappy buyer writes to Sam Walton, the Walmart Founder,

complaining how the tyres sold by Walmart had worn off prematurely. To this, Sam responds with a letter expressing deep regret at the buyer's unfortunate experience with the tyres and adds that four Firestone tyres are underway with Walmart's compliments, and hopes the buyer will have better experience with these. And then Sam signs off the letter with a post-script saying, 'incidentally, Walmart does not sell tyres'!

With no response forthcoming still, it was evident that it wasn't just the field staff that was unresponsive. The customer shot off yet another email five days later, asking whether he should escalate the matter to his superiors in Germany to expect a response. Within minutes, the CEO's secretary responded to the customer to 'bear with them' since the customer's complaints had "been immediately attended and are continuously being discussed with the Head of After Sales (Mumbai) and his representatives, who are regularly in touch with you."

How does one 'bear with someone's actions' when one is not even informed of the actions being taken? As for the 'representatives regularly in touch' with the customer, they were the same unresponsive local representatives as before, essentially parroting their original stance. Cutting the long story short, with the car running without a spare tyre for a month, the desperate customer was arm-twisted by VW into settling the matter by coughing out 55% of the price of Rs17,000. Surely that's not how VW treats its customers back home? ■



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