Case study: Tesco and The Complaining Cow

From court to exclusive interview and more





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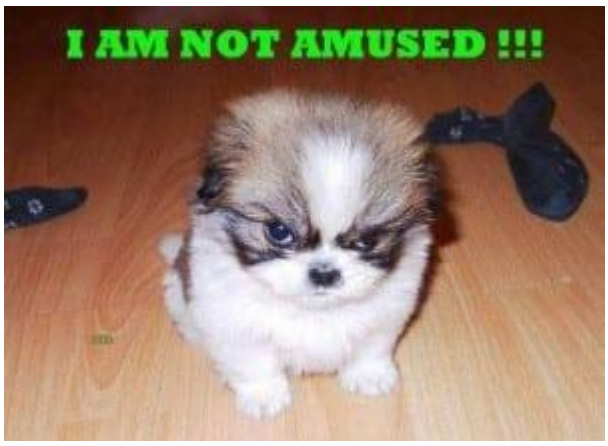
Case study: Tesco and The Complaining Cow

Every little complaint helps!



It all started with a little blog post…

On 12 July 2012, Helen Dewdney, The Complaining Cow, wrote only her second blog post. The post was the first of many about Tesco. It was a post about poor customer service and entitled *Tesco – Phillip Clarke is no Sir Terry Leahy.*



As the blog developed and included more stories of complaints gaining redress and consumer advice, Tesco appeared more and more often. Posts included finding insects in rice and taking Tesco to court in 2013. Helen won the case and shared the experience on her blog which was later shared in national media.

Correspondence with The Complaining Cow and Tesco CEO began…

When Dave Lewis was announced as the new Tesco CEO in 2014, Helen wrote to him at Unilever before his new role had started, sending her congratulations and asking him to take a look at her blog and what she had to say about Tesco! Within a week he had replied, thanking her and suggested they meet when he started.

Liking Dave's comment in his email "Keep on complaining because that is how we will improve" Helen waited a little while after Dave started to contact him again. In fact, she waited a couple of weeks, making contact during the week when the story broke about the financial issues and suspension of key Tesco personnel. Believing that it would be just what Dave wanted, to meet The Complaining Cow because, well he wouldn't be that busy would he? And even if he was he might like a little bit of light relief.

Dave Lewis & The Complaining Cow. The first meeting

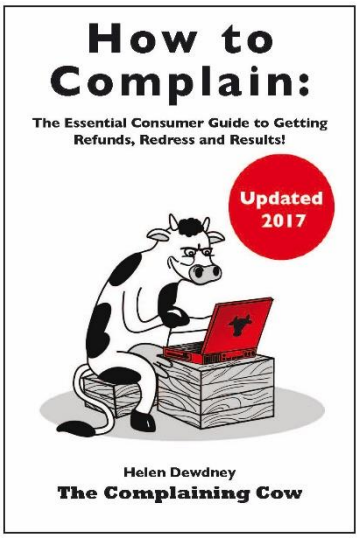


Whichever it was, within two weeks Helen and Dave were sitting in a café in Tesco discussing a number of issues. She told him her mother's and son's complaints! But Helen had also asked on social media for people's comments and gave this feedback too.

Dave asked the security guard to take a photo of the two of them. He said they weren't allowed to take photos. Helen cracked up laughing, Dave reluctantly and humbly showed his ID card. Helen wondered if it was very good training or if staff should know what the CEO looked like.

Some of the feedback included a particular case about the way teenagers were treated in a specific Tesco store. Dave ensured that someone looked into the issue and a statement was issued which Helen shared:





Dave joked that Tesco had given her material for her best-selling book, How To Complain: The ESSENTIAL Consumer Guide to Getting REFUNDS, Redress and RESULTS!. However, Helen informed him that actually Tesco were already recognised in the acknowledgements. *"Tesco, because if the service was not so utterly diabolical I wouldn't have such good endless material for my blog or gone to court, ultimately gaining enough interest in what I do that encouraged me to write the book."* Dave bought 100 books for his senior management.

Writing up the meeting on her blog, Helen posed the question "Maybe he's astute, maybe he's mad or maybe he was plain scared! Who knows, could be all 3."

Dave then invited Helen to meet his senior team.

Criticism of The Complaining Cow meeting Dave Lewis

When someone commented on the blog post what it was like to be a bought woman, Helen replied with her usual direct and fair attitude saying:

"*Thank you for your comment. I wondered how long it would be before someone accused me of this, it came a little sooner than I thought though given that I complained to them the day I wrote this post. 1) Please see the rest of the site, you will see I am a woman of principle and will not be bought. 2) Please feel free to email Dave Lewis and ask him if he thinks he will be able to silence me when I want to complain, he knew the answer the first time he met me, let alone the second and please forward me the reply I'd love to see it! 3) THE day I put up this subsequent blog post I sent a complaint to Tesco regarding their click and collect service and publicised it on Twitter 4) the cheque Tesco sent me for the books they bought (that is NOT a freebie btw, I have serious costs to cover for crying out loud!) didn't clear – you may have missed it but I did have fun telling several thousand people on Twitter and Facebook 5) Whoa! Who said I had changed my mind on Tesco? Please re reread the post and all the others. Takes more than a couple of meetings to change my mind. I will always speak my mind and will always be fair and that means if Tesco do bad I will say so but so will I if they do good. It's just that they don't do much good at the mo do they?! They might do some more good if they listen to people like us but time will tell, NOT a few freebies trust me (and if you read the rest of the blog, the book and ask the people who follow me on Twitter and like my FB page you will).*"

Meanwhile back at a Tesco half year earnings webcast…

Dave feedback about The Complaining Cow in his Tesco Plc Half Year 2014/15 Earnings Presentation October 23rd 2014

"I'll tell you a little story, if I may. I spent three hours in a store on Friday afternoon with a lady who some of you may know. She has a blogger title called the Complaining Cow. She -- no, it's really important because some of your harshest critics are where you learn the most. And she's written a book and her book was inspired by some service or poor service that she got from Tesco.

So I sat down with her for three hours. She had got her many thousands of people who complained to her about Tesco to give her all the answers. So I sat with her in a store in Hertfordshire and went through all the issues she can see as a Tesco customer. The really interesting thing -- she knows a lot about Tesco, and she's really very, very, very precise -- she had no idea; when I told her about farm to fork, when I talked to her about food waste, when I talked to her about the education program and the free meals and the things that we're doing around our stores, she had no idea; no idea. So in three hours, she walked away with lots of examples about how the brand was doing exactly what she would want it to do but we hadn't for whatever reason been able to communicate to somebody who is probably one of the most engaged customers that we have."

Maybe it felt like 3 hours, Helen said it was just short of 2 and a half! She also laughed at being called “precise”. Her mother laughed at her being called “a lady”.

Meeting the Tesco senior executive team over lunch

When Helen met the Tesco senior executive team at the end of November 2014, they discussed numerous issues including customer service, social media, the website, and “click and collect”. Again, whilst publically feeding back on her meeting with some of the issues raised and some responses, she included some information on a story that had recently hit the headlines.

Tesco and the guide dog

An untrained staff member had told a woman she wasn’t allowed to bring a guide dog into the store. Tesco was reported as having given £5,000 to charity and put training in place and that was it. Helen reported on her blog that she wasn’t going anywhere without addressing this story. She asked – “Why on earth would you need to train someone that guide dogs are OK in stores?” “When the staff didn’t grow up in the UK and they have no knowledge or understanding of guide dogs (or hearing dogs etc.)” was the reply.

She also said that she was also going to “go into one” about how typical of Tesco it was to throw £5k at the problem and run away and why didn’t they buy a dog. Tesco said it gave £5,000 towards a puppy.

More blog posts and social media

Helen continued to criticise Tesco in social media and her blog throughout 2015. On Facebook she informed her followers that someone on her blog had commented that her blog https://www.thecomplainingcow.co.uk was “like a lab test honeytrap for all the Tesco haters”. Make of that what you will. She knows one thing for sure and that's she will always be there, watching, criticising, possibly complimenting but always there.



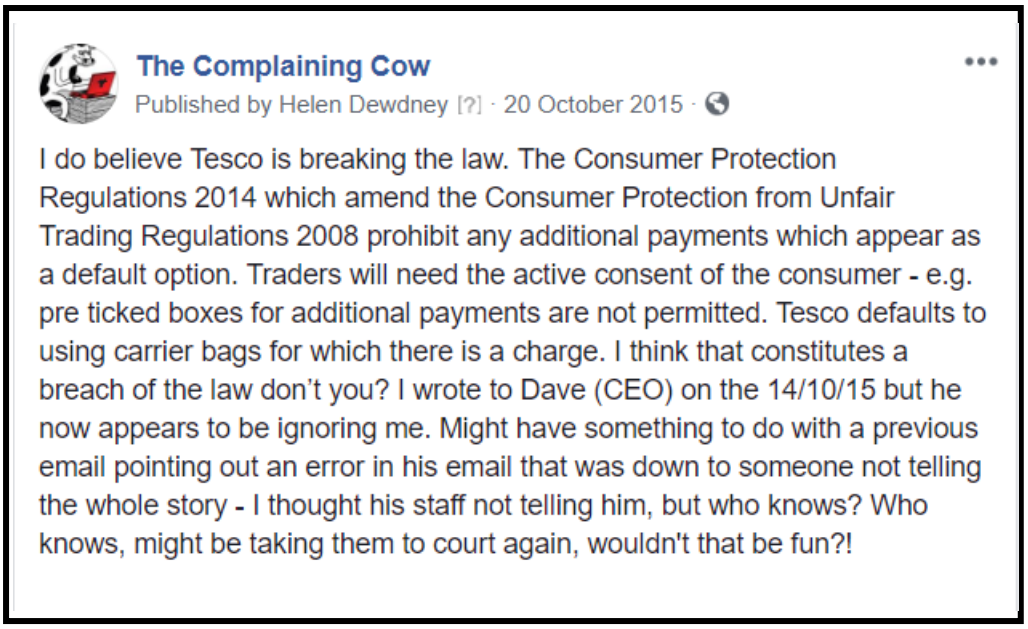
Tesco adverts

In December 2015 Helen garnered opinions on Tesco adverts and wrote posts about them. She made no secret of her opinion (not positive) on them and told Dave. At some point she feels she must tell him that she wishes that he would stop overusing the word “polarising.” Helen wrote the post Tesco takes flak in the battle of the Christmas adverts

However, many of the criticisms were acknowledged and changes were made and one advert was pulled completely. This was down to various feedback, including Helen’s.

Consumer law change

Helen wrote to a number of supermarkets about their sites forcing online shopping to have paid-for carrier bags, with their orders, , which is illegal. The Consumer Protection Regulations 2014 prohibit any additional payments which appear as a default option.



The Complaining Cow
Published by Helen Dewdney [?] · 20 October 2015 ·

I do believe Tesco is breaking the law. The Consumer Protection Regulations 2014 which amend the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 prohibit any additional payments which appear as a default option. Traders will need the active consent of the consumer - e.g. pre ticked boxes for additional payments are not permitted. Tesco defaults to using carrier bags for which there is a charge. I think that constitutes a breach of the law don't you? I wrote to Dave (CEO) on the 14/10/15 but he now appears to be ignoring me. Might have something to do with a previous email pointing out an error in his email that was down to someone not telling the whole story - I thought his staff not telling him, but who knows? Who knows, might be taking them to court again, wouldn't that be fun?!

She posted Dave's response regarding rectifying the system error:



The Complaining Cow
Published by Hootsuite [?] · 23 October 2015 ·

Now, remember this about Tesco and breach of law? http://ow.ly/TKzMF and having a go at all and sundry on Twitter oh and emailing Dave. You'll be pleased to know I got them to see their errors of their ways (I do like that line, used it twice on the telly yesterday!) I give you his response:
"Dear Helen,

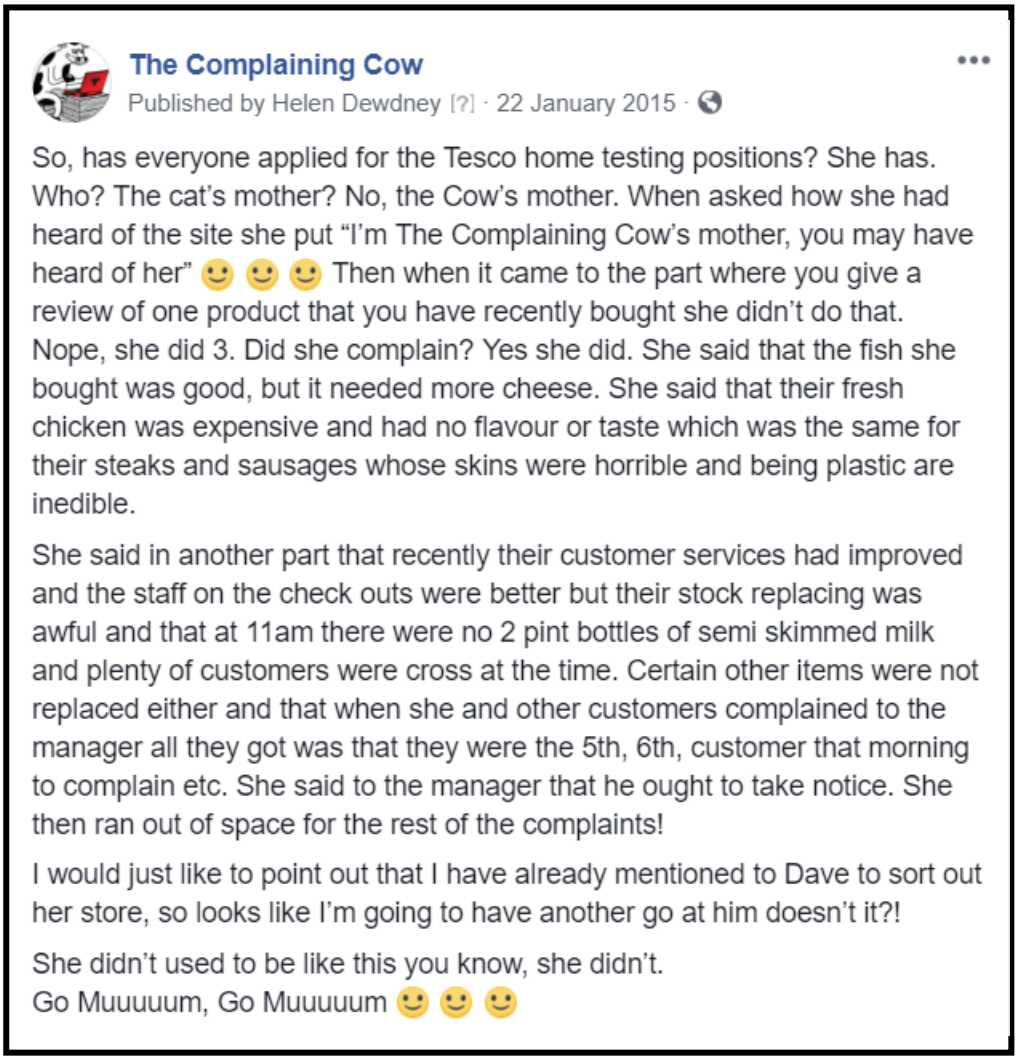
Thank you for raising this with me.

We have been working through a number of systems changes with the move to mandatory charges for bags and have been discussing those with Trading Standards. For all new customers the system defaults to "without bags" as the selection. In this instance we think that the issue was caused by the system automatically remembering where existing customers have previously stated a preference to have bagged deliveries – and thus retaining that preference. We have already made some changes to our site (which hopefully you will have experienced by now) which reset all customers' preference to "without bags" and then invited them to re-set their preferences going forward.

I hope that answers your question.

Kind regards
Dave"

In 2016 Helen's mother even got in on the act of complaining about Tesco!



The Complaining Cow
Published by Helen Dewdney [?] · 22 January 2015 ·

So, has everyone applied for the Tesco home testing positions? She has. Who? The cat's mother? No, the Cow's mother. When asked how she had heard of the site she put "I'm The Complaining Cow's mother, you may have heard of her" Then when it came to the part where you give a review of one product that you have recently bought she didn't do that. Nope, she did 3. Did she complain? Yes she did. She said that the fish she bought was good, but it needed more cheese. She said that their fresh chicken was expensive and had no flavour or taste which was the same for their steaks and sausages whose skins were horrible and being plastic are inedible.

She said in another part that recently their customer services had improved and the staff on the check outs were better but their stock replacing was awful and that at 11am there were no 2 pint bottles of semi skimmed milk and plenty of customers were cross at the time. Certain other items were not replaced either and that when she and other customers complained to the manager all they got was that they were the 5th, 6th, customer that morning to complain etc. She said to the manager that he ought to take notice. She then ran out of space for the rest of the complaints!

I would just like to point out that I have already mentioned to Dave to sort out her store, so looks like I'm going to have another go at him doesn't it?!

She didn't used to be like this you know, she didn't.
Go Muuuuum, Go Muuuuum

Reciprocal blog post writing

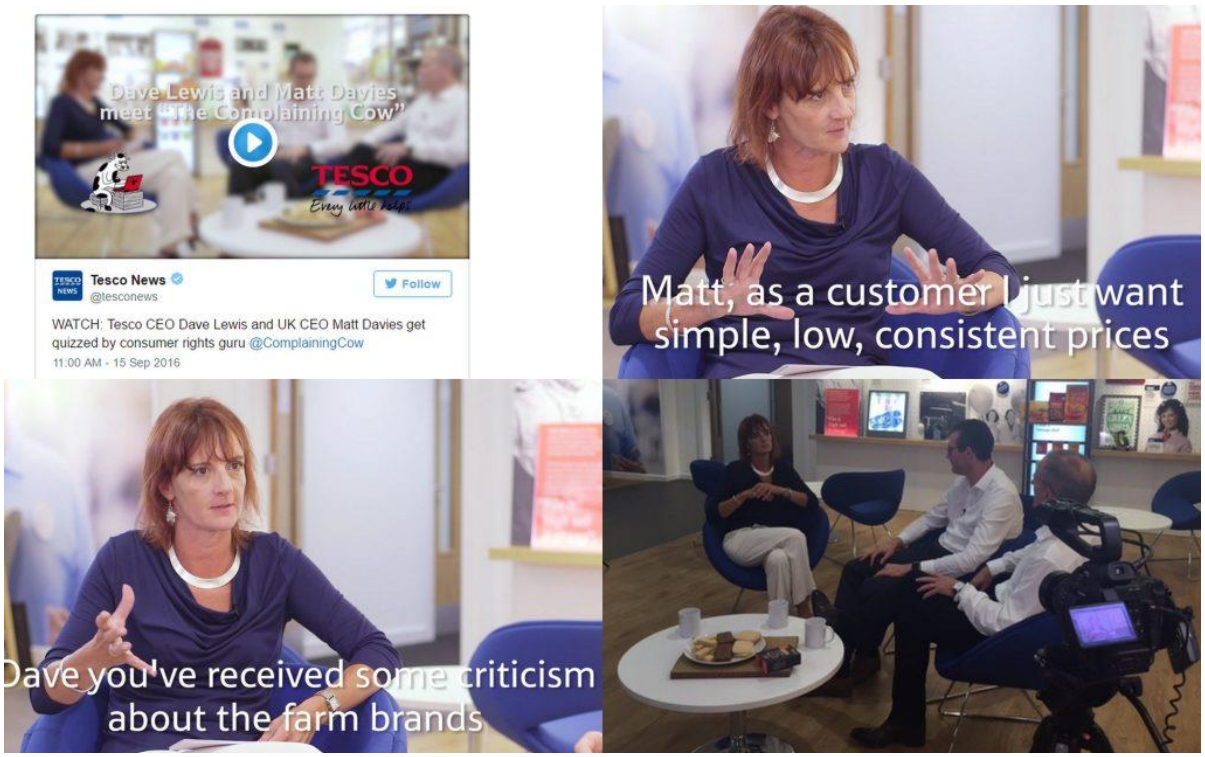
Amongst the Tesco bashing, Helen wrote a post on LinkedIn about Tesco listening to customers being reflected in their latest figures. Tesco wrote a post for Helen's blog informing people of how to become a Tesco tester

Helen wrote a post for the Tesco blog. The Complaining Cow: Are supermarkets giving us value for our money yet? Helen's comments were used in press articles. As were her comments in April 2016 for The Mirror; Tesco tells angry Sainsbury's customers: 'We'll take your Brand Match vouchers'. This however was swiftly followed by comments two weeks later for The Telegraph; Tesco customers "gutted" as supermarket scraps popular double Clubcard points scheme and then came the infamous fake farms…

Fake farms

When the story hit the media regarding Tesco labelling their products with farms that didn't exist, Helen challenged Dave in an email on the issue. Three times in fact. Fake farms – a bad smell that won't go away. Well he did tell her to keep on complaining as that would be the only way to improve. (She often wonders if he regrets saying that to her.) Her piece criticised the labelling heavily but she also relayed all his main points on the matter. They continue to disagree.

The exclusive interview



Nearly two years on from when Helen first suggested it, she got her exclusive interview with the CEO in September 2016. Dave does very few interviews and this was the first with the Group CEO, Matt Davies, too. It was the only interview Matt and Dave did together. To our knowledge it was the first time any CEO had been filmed being interviewed by a non-employee or non-traditional journalist.

Helen really enjoyed working with the Tesco team and history was made. It was shared widely on social media and internally, where Tesco got useful feedback from staff. It continues to get views on a regular basis.

Tesco Chairman

Having continually challenged the Tesco UK and Group CEO, Helen turned her criticism to the Chair of the Board. In March 2017 Helen attended the Retail Week conference to run a workshop. Whilst there she attended a seminar where John Allan, chair of the Tesco board, made remarks about white men becoming an endangered species. The full comment was “If you are female and from an ethnic minority background, preferably both you are in an extremely propitious period so go for it frankly. For a thousand years, men have got most of these jobs, the pendulum has swung very significantly the other way now and will do for the foreseeable future, I think, so you are at an advantage. If you are a white male, tough. You are an endangered species and you are going to have to work twice as hard.”

Not impressed, Helen wrote about this on her blog. Casual sexism is alive and kicking in UK boardrooms.

Interviewing the new Tesco Chief Customer Officer



Two months later, Helen was interviewing the new Chief Customer Officer for her blog post The customer is still the boss. There she shared thoughts and plans from Alessandra Bellini.

Other Tesco food related incidents

Later in 2017 Helen had a Tesco insect in raspberries! Her blog post talked about naming him Michael. She decided that they didn't get the joke, that or they were miserable!

Then later in the year at Christmas time, Helen provided advice on people's consumer rights for some people had bought poor quality Tesco turkeys. Don't gobble rancid Tesco turkey. Know your rights

Christmas in July

Staying with the food theme… In 2018 Helen attended the Tesco Christmas in July event. Journalists and bloggers attended various Christmas in July events ready to write their articles covering the best of what various stores have to offer for release later in the year. Helen meanwhile wrote an amusing blog piece, in July, covering the whole Tesco event.



The rest of 2018 and beyond

With the Tesco 100 year celebrations to come in 2019 there will surely fun and games to be had?! One thing of which we can be sure though, is that Helen will be keeping a close eye on all things Tesco!

In summary

- The Complaining Cow is Tesco's harshest critic, with 8k followers on Twitter and Facebook, continually writing about Tesco since 2012, taking them to court and winning in 2013.
- Tesco Group CEO listened and listened again and again
- Tesco Group CEO shared story with stakeholders.
- Harshest critic continues to criticise.
- Harshest critic shares the feedback from her criticism.
- Harshest critic demonstrates that one CEO in a supermarket wants to hear complaints and wants to show that he is listening.
- Tesco take the rough with the smooth.
- Harshest critic continues to be a critical friend!
- Harshest critic and company slowly but surely build trust…
- The largest supermarket in the UK is gradually involving its harshest critic in its work, to improve its customer experience

Links for all the stories can be found at

The Complaining Cow's history with Tesco

If you are interested in working with Helen see Services for a variety of innovative solutions to your business needs. You can contact her with your own ideas too of course!