

How to Write a Complaint Letter About an Ad or other Media

Opening paragraph

- *Say why you're writing.* Specify the ad or other media (use the name of the ad if you know it)
- Write one VERY SHORT sentence about your problem with the ad
- Briefly say what your action is going to be (see below)

Following paragraphs

- *Go into more detail* about why the ad is problematic for you, for society, for women, for men, for people of color, or whatever. Be productive and descriptive. Do not say "I think" or "I believe" or "I feel" — be strong! Do not go off on a rant, even if you are angry. You will be dismissed as a crazy person if you do rant, and the company will not read your letter or take it seriously.
- *Tell them again what your action will be.* Always say you will not buy their product until the ad is "pulled" (no longer published, on TV, etc.). Even if you were not a customer before, tell them you were a formerly loyal customer. If you're planning to stage a protest, say that, but don't state the date.
- *State what the company will need to do* to earn your business back. Issue an apology in a press release? Pull the ad from TV/radio or magazines, or take the billboard down?
- *Tell the offending company you will spread the word* to other customers and to all your friends and acquaintances. Then go send your letter in an e-mail to all your friends, post it on your MySpace or Facebook page, etc. and urge your friends/family to take action too.
- *Sign your real name* and write your city and state below your name.

Take more advanced action

If you have more time and/or incredible amounts of ire about your ad/media, here are more steps you can take that will make a difference:

- *Send the letter/e-mail to the ad agency that created the ad.* Find out who the agency was and send them the letter as well. Do not call them. Why? The advertiser (company whose products are being sold) made the final decisions about the ad's content. It's hard to tell how much was the advertiser's doing and how much was the agencies'.
- *Use more modes of communication.* Make phone calls and write a real, paper letter too (not just an e-mail). Media outlets pay attention to this stuff!
- *Send it to the editorial body.* If the ad was on TV, send a letter to the TV station or cable channel, and specify the date you saw the ad and what show was on. Similarly, if the ad was in a magazine, pull out the ad and mail it to the magazine with your letter. Send it to the editor-in-chief and also the sales director. (When I was a magazine editor, our readers opinions mattered more than you want to know.)
- *Post a flyer* on or near the local retail store of the business that details the problems with the ad. Again, use productive communication.

When you're done

Once you write your super-cool, pointed letter, just save a copy and change it a little each time you come across an ad. Make it easy for yourself to write these again. Keep a file of all your letters and responses and date any change that happens. This is a cool way to document your activism and look back on all the change you've made!

Why issue a complaint in the first place?

Here's why: *It makes a difference, even if you never get a response.* When a company's sales go down, the people at the company wonder why that's happening. You want to hit them over the head with a hint so they will change their tactics. Also, remember that consumers have the most power over companies, since, as a for-profit corporation, their main concern is — duh — profits. When we don't buy the products, the companies have less money and thus less advertising power. And, when you raise a stink (even a little stink), companies get humiliated, which is usually the only way to get them to change.

You can post your letters and responses on about-face.org.

You can post problematic ads and your responses on the [Women's Center Facebook Fan Page](#).

Each Ms. Magazine issue has problematic ads in the back, as well as, you can kind find "[offenders](#)" on about-face.org.