



Who's your ombudsman?

By John A. Gentle, DLP

I OFTEN RUN HOME FROM A STORE, write down the events of an interaction that I had, and then lose the note. However, in a recent case, the unsolved problem had a built-in, daily reminder. Almost every night my Droid smart phone automatically turned itself back on after I powered it off—if I could only be so lucky with the other notes I lose.

At least a month passed before I got a chance to stop at the cell phone store. The staff was very courteous, and with a minimal wait I was invited to tell my story of woe to a representative. The first thing she said was, “Do you have a troubleshooting application?” Before I could answer she looked and said, “No...too bad.” Apparently there is an “app” that monitors and analyzes end-user experience on all levels of transactions.

She looked at the phone and then told me that she had not heard about this problem. Turning to a colleague she asked him if he knew. He indicated that there was a problem with a different version, but he had not heard of my phone rebooting itself after being powered off.

She turned to me and said something to the extent that the company may know about it, but as of now there is no fix for this problem—however, it could be fixed by the time the next update is released. With that she handed me the phone and I was bid *adieu* without their recording any information about my complaint, model number, etc.

Were the manufacturer and wireless companies really aware of my problem? Was it the hardware or the software? If someone was aware, was anyone working on the problem? Would there ever be a fix? Or was my R2D2 simply under the mysterious control of the Death Star?

Here is a simple axiom: Best in class operations have a process to log and respond to all complaints and recommendations. What happens to complaints at your company? Do your carriers and third-party

logistics providers (3PLs) have a safe and effective way to report problems or sensitive personnel issues?

Progressive companies have a way to log all complaints and recommendations along with a process to respond. I like a system that has the following features:

- **Web based:** carrier or vendor accessed, company-based website
- **Confidential:** information goes directly to a process leader or ombudsman
- **Contact info:** complainant's name contact info (e-mail and phone) is captured
- **Acknowledgement:** date and time complainant sent an acknowledgement of problem
- **Name of recipient:** person who received information and will be responding
- **Problem classification:** type of problem
- **Status updates:** new, acknowledged and under investigation, or closed

Web systems that have these features have proven to attract a variety of issues—some important, some small and nagging, others confidential. People that take the time to complain are sending a message about something that is important to them, and you need to make it important to you and your team.

The fact that the system collects complaints, some being confidential, means that this system needs to be managed by an upper level manager who will also act as the team's ombudsman.

Some managers believe that there is no need for an ombudsman. I would argue to the contrary. Senior managers and companies having built programs based on integrity need to be visible, vigilant, and demanding that suppliers report any improprieties, regardless of how small.

Everyone admires companies that demand the best from each other. Make sure that everyone knows that whistle blowing is important to your logistics operation and that these messages will be dealt with by a person who is above reproach, has authority, will deal quickly and effectively, and provide an appreciative and appropriate response to the reporting party.

How do you collect and respond to issues? Who is your ombudsman? □

John A. Gentle is president of John A. Gentle & Associates, LLC, a logistics consulting firm specializing in contract/relationship management and regulatory compliance for shippers, carriers, brokers, and distribution centers. A recipient of several industry awards, he has more than 35 years of experience in transportation and logistics management. He can be reached at jag@RelaTranShips.com.