

Vodafone worst for complaints

VODAFONE is inundated with three times as many complaints as its rivals. Between July and September, it had 18 complaints for every 100,000 customers, compared to the average of six.

Telecoms watchdog Ofcom has named Vodafone the worst mobile phone provider for complaints every quarter for the past two years.

Talk Mobile and Virgin also fared badly with eight complaints per 100,000 customers. Tesco performed best with one complaint per 100,000.

BT was worst for TV. At 19 complaints about pay TV per 100,000 customers, it received nearly five times the industry average of four.

It also topped the list for broadband complaints, racking up 36 per 100,000 customers — far higher than the 20 typically seen across the industry.

Two other companies in the BT Group — Plusnet and EE — came first and second for landline complaints.

Sky attracted the fewest complaints. Lindsey Fussell, director of Ofcom's consumer group, says: 'We won't stand for complacency when it comes to customer service. We expect providers to make it a top priority.'

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Could you find a stranger's lost

By **Louise Eccles**

INSIDE a dingy auction house in South London, a motley crew is gathering. Cockney traders, young eBay sellers, shopkeepers, charity fundraisers and tourists.

The regulars glare at the first-timers suspiciously and grumble about newcomers pushing up the prices. The newcomers pretend not to notice and bury their faces in their auction catalogues.

Everyone takes their seats and the excitement begins to build. But unlike a traditional auction, no one is here to bid on art or an antique vase.

Today's prized lots will be other people's dirty laundry. That will sound strange to many readers because, well, it is.

I've come to Greasby's, the biggest auction house in the country for lost luggage.

It auctions off 200 suitcases a month which major airlines at Heathrow, including British Airways, were unable to reunite with their owners.

The 100-year-old company sells the entire case, complete with the holiday-makers' clothes inside.

But there's a catch. Bidders are forbidden from opening the cases before they buy them.

It means you could end up with a suitcase packed with Vivienne Westwood gowns and Yves Saint Laurent suits — or more often, scuffed flip-flops and Primark bikinis.

For anyone who has ever lost a suitcase, it is disconcerting to think of strangers rifling through your used holiday clothes. But for savvy bargain hunters this twice-monthly auction is a treasure trove.

East Londoner Gary sits behind me — for him, it's his livelihood. So lucrative is the industry that the divorcee can spend four months of the year travelling around the Far East to Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Would I be able to make a fortune in my first foray into lost luggage auctions?

Sadly, I'm told most of the valuable items — electrical equipment such as phones, hair straighteners and tablet computers — have already been removed and will be auctioned off separately.

New clothes with the tags still attached and toiletries are also removed and sold separately to maximise the auction house's profits. Personal items such as photographs have been taken out as well.

'You are buying someone's dirty laundry,' laughs Christine Sachett, the owner of the auction house, which she took over from her father in 1987.

But the regulars know that if you get it right, there's money to be made and the tension is etched on their faces as the auction begins.

The room falls silent as Christine walks to the front of the room and lays down the house rules. All sales are final and if you haven't paid by 3pm the next day, you will lose your £100 deposit and be banned from the saleroom.

I sit with my bidding card and wait until Lot 57 comes up. Buyers are allowed to inspect the bags up to an hour before the auction and Lot 57 seems

Few know about it, but every fortnight suitcases left at Heathrow are sold at auction. So did we find designer gems inside — or just dirty laundry?



Long-haul: Louise shows

like a safe bet. It is a solid, black American Tourister suitcase — a Google search on my smartphone tells me that it would retail brand new for £109 in John Lewis.

The wheels are all working and, most importantly, I think, it looks clean. The only other detail I know is that it contains women's clothing.

Cases are separated into five categories: women's clothing, men's clothing, children's clothing, African clothing and Asian clothing.

The Asian and African clothing is in high demand and often goes for a premium, Christine tells me.

Minutes later a bidding war breaks out over a navy blue suitcase marked as 'women's Asian clothing'. Cases generally go for £15 upwards, but this one finally sells for £24.

When Lot 57 is called, I hold up my card to bid £15 and

quickly find myself pitted against a man who has partially hidden himself around the corner so that only one arm and his feet are visible.

I am determined to get my hands on a case and he relents when I raise my price to £26.

As I go to pay, I wonder about the unfortunate woman who will never be reunited with her case of holiday clothes.

In most instances, lost luggage is tracked easily through the barcode on the airline's luggage label.

But sometimes, the code may have been typed in wrongly by an airline worker or the tag goes missing.

Most UK airlines use the World Tracer System, which tracks missing bags for 100 days using information such as journey history, its appearance and contents. Research from

SITA, the makers of the system, claims that 23.1 million bags are lost, stolen or damaged every year — that's seven bags for every 1,000 passengers.

About 6 pc of these will never be reunited with their owner. After three months, if the bag cannot be returned home, the airline can destroy it or auction it off.

In the UK, auctions take place regularly at BCVA in Bristol, Mulberry Bank in Glasgow and Wellers in Milton Keynes, Bucks.

But not before airport workers and government officials have checked the bags for drugs, weapons and other smuggled goods and illegal imports.

In the UK, baggage auctions are still relatively small, but in the U.S., the industry is so big that one auction house has become a tourist attraction.

The Unclaimed Baggage Centre in Scottsboro, Arizona, has contracts with every major American airline to buy their lost cases.

It then sifts through them and dry cleans the clothes,

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Did you know?
The most expensive Christmas tree, in an Abu Dhabi hotel in 2010, was worth £8 million. It was adorned with diamonds

Warning over flight strikes at

HOLIDAYMAKERS who booked festive getaways after dates for strikes were announced could find themselves out of pocket.

Insurers will pay a daily sum or even the full cost of your trip if it is delayed or cancelled due to industrial action.

However, if you book your trip or buy cover after strikes

are announced, you can't expect a payout.

A wave of Christmas strikes at airports and on airlines were announced on December 16. Some BA flight crews are to go on strike on Christmas Day and Boxing Day in a row about pay.

Short-haul flights starting and finishing in Heathrow

will be affected. BA says it will refund customers or reroute them to another airport within a 300-mile radius if they are affected.

But it's not clear whether customers will be able to choose a refund if they do not wish to be rerouted.

If you book accommodation or excursions that are non-