

Standing On Principle

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Asking a New Yorker to complain is like asking a dog to bark, a mouse to eat cheese or a car alarm to go off in the middle of the night.

So it's no surprise we struck a nerve — heck, we hit bone! — when we asked readers to send in their biggest "New York Nuisances." We got 'em, all right, and over the last two months, the letters just haven't stopped coming. Seems there's lots to complain about in this city. (Well, duh.)

At Friedman of Brooklyn bemoans the lack of public rest-rooms, Ray Harvey of Manhattan gripes about noisy garbage trucks, and Upper West Sider J.R. Bruno grumbles over

takeout menus from Chinese restaurants, Ann Darland of Chelsea can't stand rude shopkeepers, and Caryl Ehrlich of midtown hates yokel tourists.

There are still hundreds of letters to go, and no way to run them all, but we promised you solutions to these problems, too. So we scoured the city for street-smart experts, and guess what? If you're mad as hell, you don't have to take it anymore!

"Most people don't know about the laws on the books, and they don't know how to complain effectively," says Raymond Alvin, who kicks up such a fuss — and gets such good results — that he calls himself the "original mad-as-hell New Yorker." Alvin is author of the "Get-a-Grip Newsletter" and the recently released "Get-a-Grip New York Book II" (StreetBeat Publications, \$12.95; (212) 501-9111).

"Those of us who do complain make up for those of us who don't," he says.

Here are some people who, with

Alvin, make up our panel of experts:

■ Louis Camporeale, an advocate for "motorist education," who produces and markets his own line of dashboard "Parking Pal" signs to alert police when you are legally parked.

■ Richard Frome, a Manhattan real-estate attorney, who helps city apartment-dwellers deal with noisy neighbors.

■ Lucian Chalfen, spokesman for the Department of Sanitation, who clears up the city's new recycling regulations.

■ Fiona Watt, a forester with the Parks Department and director of the New York Tree Trust, who disentangles the procedure for trimming a city-owned tree.

■ And then there's customer-service pro Shelia Spencer, aka the store clerk's worst nightmare.

Here's what they have to say about some of your problems.

Taken for a ride

Got a complaint about New York City's crowded, inefficient public transportation and the fare hikes that don't seem to improve it? Get in line.

"What should be no more than an hour-and-15-minute commute from downtown Manhattan to Staten Island takes almost 2 hours!" moans Gail Chase, who waits each day for the unreliable \$61 bus. "This bus (and all buses, I might add) should be conveniently waiting for the commuter, and not the other way around!"

But it's her fellow subway riders who bug Trudy Tarallo of the Bronx, especially men who take up all the seats by "sitting as if they were giving birth."

"I live by the 'Get-a-Grip' credo,"

says Alvin, "that 'First, you gotta get their attention.'"

The Transit Authority's Brooklyn customer-service department receives more than 5,000 complaints a month, so Alvin always goes straight to the top. Next time, write directly to Jack Lusk, Senior Vice President for Customer Services, 370 Jay St., Brooklyn, NY 11202. (The Bus Customers Relations Center is at 25 Jamaica Ave., Room 1, Brooklyn, NY 11207; (718) 927-7499.)

As for the guy sitting next to you "with his legs spread-eagle in different time zones," Alvin says, here are three sure ways to score a seat:

1. Strap on your portable stereo and sing off-key.

2. Munch on some garlic and breathe in his direction.

3. Stick a piece of string in your mouth and let about 4 inches dangle. "A friend of mine tried this one on a DC-7, and so one sat next to him for his entire 3,000-mile trip," Alvin recalls. "Of course, a New York subway is no DC-7. New Yorkers have seen it all."

Get-a-Grip tip: Minivan services tend to be cheaper and much faster.

A parking runaround

Fred Galbas of Sheephead Bay has a litany of parking laments: "Meters that cheat me, take my money, short me on time or no time at all. Broken meters that police and meter maids issue tickets for. Parking tickets which I was unaware of until being advised by mail, and then of course, I'm unable to remember where my car was parked on July 28 at 12:45 p.m.," so I'm handicapped to defend myself."

Camporeale, aka The Parking Pal, says, "Unfortunately these things

happen for one reason: money." Still, he insists, there are plenty of parking places in the city if you know where and how to look.

It's legal to park on a street with missing or defaced parking-regulation signs, or at a broken meter, for the maximum time designated. And commercial vehicles can park on residential streets between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. if on a service or delivery call.

It's up to you, the motorist, to prove you know the law and fight bogus tickets.

"Excuse the pun, but motorists need to have street smarts when it comes to parking," Camporeale advises. (For more parking tips, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Parking Pal, P.O. Box 350-003, Brooklyn, NY 11235; www.parkingpal.com.)



STANDING ON PRINCIPLE: Lou Camporeale with his "Parking Pal" sign.

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