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Consumer Evaluations of Responses to Complaints: What's Fair and Why

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CONSUMER EVALUATIONS OF RESPONSES TO COMPLAINTS: WHAT'S FAIR AND WHY

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Marketers are often advised to let angry customers "blow off steam," express their feelings and opinions freely. Managers often train retail and other service personnel to offer apologies when products are defective or service delivery fails. This article suggests that theories of procedural fairness can offer insights into the effectiveness of these complaint-handling strategies. It is suggested that an apology will not compensate for failure to provide a tangible outcome such as a refund or exchange. In fact, an apology or encouragement to express feelings may be perceived as fraudulent if not followed by a tangible outcome.

Every organization offering products or services to the public is likely to receive complaints at some time. Given this unfortunate reality, every marketing manager must develop an approach to respond to complaints cost-effectively, without further alienating the customer. Regardless of quality controls, occasional lapses in manufacturing or service are often beyond the practical control of even the most diligent producer. For example, some customers will be more demanding than others, and a firm cannot profitably set quality standards to meet the criteria of its most demanding customers.

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A number of researchers and government groups have investigated factors that motivate dissatisfied customers to complain. There is some evidence that younger and better-educated customers are more likely to volunteer complaints, especially if (1) they believe the problem is an important one, and (2) the potential benefit of expressing a complaint is greater than the expected cost. A marketing manager needs to develop response strategies and policies regardless of the consumer's motivation or, in some cases, regardless of the legitimacy of the complaint. Once a customer lodges a complaint, the original transaction may become less relevant to the consumer's ultimate satisfaction than events that follow the complaint. For example, Omaha Steaks, which sells prime meat products by mail, found that customers whose complaints were quickly resolved were more profitable than customers who had not complained at all.[9] TARP's research across industries has shown that even customers with problems can be retained if their complaints are handled effectively; indeed, many of these customers become as loyal as those who had no problems with the firm at all.[12]

Complaint-Handling Strategies

Many companies have developed policies and training programs to handle complaints. If a correctable error can be identified, such as a defective television set or a poorly cooked meal, many companies will voluntarily make restitution on the spot, and many will also offer some kind of apology. In some cases, however, the source of the problem may be hard to identify (did the customer really ask for a rare steak?), the problem may not be correctable (the flight may be grounded by weather problems), or the problem may derive solely from the consumer's unique standards (hair wasn't cut properly or the new car squeaks more than it should). In these situations, identifying an appropriate response may be more difficult.

Thus, when faced with a complaint, the firm's representative should first answer the question, "What can we do to leave the customer with a positive impression?" A hotel may assume that guests facing a long line at the check-in desk will be satisfied with an apology or a chance to "let off steam," while in fact the tired guests may also expect a complimentary drink. On the other hand, a restaurant may brusquely offer a free meal or beverage while the customers are seeking an apology for indifferent service. When firms do not question their assumptions about what customers want, they risk misdirecting their energies as well as creating additional customer annoyance.

The complaining consumer usually feels that he or she has been harmed by the marketer through defective or otherwise unsatisfactory merchandise, inadequate service, or psychological insult. Societal norms encourage people to expect that restitution will be made for harm done. Just as a person insulted by a friend will expect an apology, and a person whose car is damaged will expect to receive compensation, the consumer who feels harmed—whether physically or psychologically—will expect to receive compensation. Consumers will evaluate the fairness of the transaction on the basis of whether they perceive this compensation as adequate and appropriate.

Psychological equity theories have investigated perceptions of fairness of compensation for harm. These theories may help managers understand and develop approaches to complaint response. A brief discussion of equity theory is presented in the context of complaint-handling. Next, three aspects of fairness are discussed: distributive fairness, the extent to which outcomes are allocated according to some recognized principle, such as the principle of correspondence between input and output; procedural fairness, the extent to which procedures used to determine a distribution of outcomes has allowed for objectivity and consumer representation; and third, interactional fairness, which addresses the style with which a decision is implemented. Finally, after a review of some empirical research on post-complaint consumer satisfaction, managerial implications are presented.

Equity Theory

As a psychological theory, equity theory suggests that people will become angry when equity principles are violated. Discomfort occurs whether one is a victim of unfair practice, observes another who is victimized, or treats another unfairly. Researchers have found that people who experience, observe, or even create unfairness will try to reduce their discomfort by trying to restore either physical or psychological equity; that is, they will want to make restitution by tangible repayment (e.g., refund for damaged merchandise) or else rearrange their perceptions of a situation ("Maybe I didn't use the product correctly").

A marketing manager needs to develop response strategies regardless of the legitimacy of the complaint.

In a complaint setting, when a product or service failure occurs, the marketer can be characterized as a "harm-doer" and the consumer as the "victim." Considerations of equity can be applied to understanding the consumer's perspective. For example, if a consumer complains that a product was defective, the store may be expected to offer a full refund or exchange. On the other hand, the firm may use psychological strategies to restore equity; for example, the complainer may be labeled as a "crank" who didn't use the product correctly.

A further aspect of equity that is relevant for marketers comes from the concept of "relative deprivation." If a hotel guest complains that the TV set is not working, the hotel may offer a 10 percent discount as compensation. This guest will be satisfied with the response until he or she overhears the desk clerk offering a full remission of the bill—a free room—for the same complaint. Thus this theory suggests that consumers' criteria for evaluating how fairly their own complaints were resolved, will come from observations of the way other complaints are handled. When direct observation of others is not possible, consumers will probably use norms that they have learned from their own families, from reading, or from talking to others.

Distributive Fairness: What Do Consumers Deserve?

Theories of distributive fairness offer a framework for examining the allocation of resources or outcomes within an exchange. A key principle is that, for any transaction, each person's outcome or gain should be proportionate to his or her input,[1] that is, returns should be proportional to investments.[8] Implicitly consumers accept this principle when they say, "You get what you pay for."

However, it is important to acknowledge that principles other than input-output correspondence may appear to be operating, unless inputs are defined to include a broad class of intangibles, such as need, equality, or even "divine right."[8] Thus, consumers may believe a long wait to see a medical specialist is fair: part of the physician's input to the transaction comes from his status. On other occasions, need may be regarded as an input; when a flight is overbooked, some consumers may feel they deserve preference because they have traveled longer distances or need to get home to a family emergency. Once on an airplane, consumers who are flying on discounted tickets, or flying free because of bonus awards, will use the equality principle to evaluate fairness: they will feel entitled to the same service as all others in their class of service even though they offered lower inputs in the form of payment.

Procedural Fairness: How to Decide What to Offer the Complaining Consumer?

The perceived fairness of resource allocation, such as the relationship between investment and return, have been considered "distributive justice." More recently, researchers have examined the *procedures* through which decisions are made.[14]

Firms risk misdirecting their energies as well as creating additional customer annoyance.

People are sometimes as concerned with the process by which a decision was made as with the decision itself. When employees evaluate the fairness of a promotion decision, when a student reviews a grade from a faculty member, or when a litigant in a civil dispute evaluates the verdict, they tend to review the procedures used to arrive at the decision as much as the outcome of the process. Did the judge or other decision-maker weigh all the evidence and was she or he truly impartial?

In a striking example, one research study demonstrated that what should have been pleasure with a completely positive outcome may be overshadowed by discontent with procedures used to arrive at that outcome. A study of traffic court participants in Chicago found that some people were dissatisfied when their cases were dismissed, although they received no fine or traffic record; questioned further, these people complained that they wanted their day in court and felt they had been denied a chance to tell their story.[11]

In a similar fashion, one might expect that satisfaction with complaint resolution might be related to the procedures used to settle the complaint. Three conditions have been identified[14] which seem to increase the importance of procedures in evaluations of fairness: when a decision is imposed involuntarily on someone, such as a traffic ticket; when people evaluate institutions; or when the chief goal of the participants involves "social harmony" as opposed to accomplishment of a specific task. These conditions tend to appear in complaint settings. Although a complaint may be escalated to an outside agency or even a lawsuit, the first step almost always requires contact with the store, manufacturer, or service firm that generated the problem.

Additionally, consumers will evaluate the brand or firm as a potential source of future transactions in addition to evaluating the specific transaction. Finally, while "group harmony" or loyalty may be more critical in an employment than a consumer setting, many service firms wish to retain a loyal following of long-term customers. Therefore, there is reason to believe that fairness in the complaint resolution procedure is important to consumers.

Procedural fairness has three dimensions:[10] (1) the collection of information, (2) the decision-maker's use of the information, and (3) the degree to which the individual whose fate is being decided believes she or he had some influence over the outcome. In a courtroom, influence may be related to the opportunities for giving evidence and the ability to present evidence in a desired order without constraints on time and content. Similarly, a consumer may wish to provide information to a retail clerk or medical receptionist who wants to take someone ahead of him or her: "I may look as though I'm either unemployed or on vacation. Actually, I work at home for $100 an hour, and every hour I sit here is costing me money. If you let that person go in ahead of me, I won't be very happy." The consumer is eager to present information that will influence the order of being seen, much as a civil litigant wishes to present complete testimony from witnesses to influence the judge.

This opportunity to present information has been called "voice", deriving from citizens' options to express feelings about the political system as opposed to leaving a place completely, or carrying out the "exist" option.[7] Possible patterns are summarized in Figure 1. The retailer or receptionist may listen patiently as the consumer presents his or her case, expressing emotions as well as facts (quadrants 2 and

4). If nothing is done, the consumer will experience what researchers have called the "frustration effect" (quadrant 4). The consumer may suspect that the opportunity for "voice" was a sham, designed to give the impression of participation in the system without substance. Such negative responses to fraudulent participation have been noted in employment studies, when employees are encouraged to speak but have little impact on decisions. Similar effects may occur when a consumer is encouraged to "let off steam" without influencing the resolution of the complaint.

On the other hand, if a positive outcome follows voice, the consumer will experience the "fair process" effect (quadrant 2 of Figure 1), which may enhance legitimacy of the institution.[3] In this situation, the consumer may be expected to evaluate the organization more positively.

The consumer may be denied "voice" altogether, (quadrants 1 and 2). The receptionist or retailer in our example may cut off the complaint, refusing to obtain complete information before making a judgment. Theory suggests that the consumer will be less satisfied with the experience than if she or he were allowed to speak freely and will not feel as fairly treated, regardless of the outcome.

Further investigation may be needed to identify what consumers regard as a "positive outcome" in any particular service category. For example, a passenger whose vacation flight takes off a day late may regard a free hotel room and meal as inadequate compensation. On the other hand, restaurant patrons generally regard a complimentary meal as adequate compensation for poor service.

Figure 1
Consumer Evaluation of Responses to Complaints

	LOW VOICE	**HIGH VOICE**
Tangible Outcome	1 Pleasant Surprise	2 Fair process effect
No Tangible Outcome Following Complaint	3 Consumer ignored	4 Pleasant Surprise

Interactional Fairness

A third aspect of fairness was recently identified by social psychology researchers.[2] The idea of "interactional fairness" was suggested from a study of MBA students who were interviewed for corporate jobs; their perceptions of fairness were affected by inappropriate or rude questions. Similarly, consumers might be expected to believe that a firm's response to a complaint is unfair when it is accompanied by rudeness. Emotion or affect may be a commodity for exchange in its own right.[12] Following the principles of equity theory, consumers may feel they receive less than they should when business is transacted with rudeness. Indeed, rudeness may become a major source of complaint against the firm.

Consumers were more satisfied if they had the opportunity to express feelings and opinions.

An apology may be viewed either as an example of style or as an intangible which is exchanged. Equity researchers have suggested that an apology can alter inputs as well as outputs[16]; the marketer offers humility, (an input) and the consumer may gain self-esteem, (an output). An apology also adds pleasantness to the transaction, avoiding or reducing connotations of rudeness. The theory of procedural fairness suggests that consumers will want to feel they have influenced the outcome, and an apology does acknowledge that the service representative listened to the consumer and recognized his or her input as deserving a response.

Empirical Research

Very little research has examined the way firms respond to consumer complaints and the way different responses can affect consumer satisfaction. One author[5] found that people prefer an apology and a refund if they believe the problem is a long-term one that can't be corrected easily; they aren't willing to take an exchange, since they believe the second item has the same chance of being defective. On the other hand, they prefer an exchange if they believe the problem was temporary.

Studies have shown that consumers associate higher service quality with conformity to expectations and decreased variability.

In a recent study based on a procedural fairness framework, the authors of this article asked consumers to recall an incident of complaint about a service. They were asked whether they had had an opportunity to express feelings and opinions (voice), whether they had received an apology (input to an exchange), and whether they had received some tangible exchange or refund (outputs within equity theory). The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Consumers preferred a tangible outcome, regardless of whether they could influence the proceedings. They consistently reported more satisfaction and willingness to return to the firm for future service when they were given even a token refund. This finding reflects a key principle of equity theory, that people prefer high outcomes to low outcomes. In particular, consumers who received a free gift did not experience inequity as a result of being "overrewarded." Research has suggested that people are concerned with accepting excess gains or rewards primarily when their doing so will create a negative impression on others. Apparently, consumers believe either that their reward will be unobserved or that norms support high outcomes.

2. Interestingly, consumers tended to believe that they influenced the outcome when the outcome was positive, but not when the outcome was negative. Since many studies have documented that people tend to believe they have more control over positive events than over negative events, this result is consistent with such psychological theories as attribution theory.

3. When the outcome of a complaint was favorable, consumers were more satisfied if they had the opportunity to express feelings and opinions. However, if the outcome was negative, consumers were less satisfied if they had had a chance to express "voice" than if they did not. This finding suggests the frustration effect. People will become angry if they believe their input was ignored; they will not want to accept the appearance of participation.

4. A similar effect was found for apologies; if the firm offered some tangible compensation—even compensation below the value of what was lost—the consumers felt that an apology enhanced their opinion of the firm. If nothing was offered, consumers seemed to believe that the apology was a sham. They indicated that the contact person did not appear to be acting rationally.

5. Consumers believed they were treated more fairly when they believed the provider followed company procedure, as opposed to circumstances when they believed the provider's decision was ad hoc or arbitrary.

How Can Marketers Best Satisfy Complainers?

The findings of this study, as well as theoretical concepts from the psychological literature, suggest that marketers are wise to pay particular attention to procedures and style associated with complaint handling. Once a service failure has occurred, regardless of the appropriate target for blame, the firm must attempt to leave the consumer feeling positive about the firm and, if possible, willing to return for future service. Some specific approaches are suggested.

First, complaints should be treated seriously. By complaining, the consumer has indicated a wish to remain in the system and participate rather than choose the "exit" option.

Second, contact personnel should be given specific procedures to follow, and they should let customers know they are following corporate procedures rather than ad hoc procedures. The study cited here suggests that consumers associated adherence to procedures with perceived fairness. One reason for this association is the concept of relative deprivation that was discussed earlier: people will feel deprived if they learn that other consumers received more favorable treatment following a similar complaint. Additionally, studies have shown that consumers associate higher service quality with conformity to expectations and decreased variability.[6] Thus, consumers may be more likely to return to a firm following a pleasant outcome if they believe the outcome was not a fluke; they may feel more comfortable basing expectations on adherence to procedures than they would on being lucky enough to find a helpful service representative again.

Consumers believed they were treated more fairly when they believed the provider followed company procedure.

Third, contact personnel should be trained to listen to consumers and to apologize—but they may want to be ready to offer a tangible response as well. Consumers who "let off steam" will feel increased anger if their expression of feelings does not result in a positive response; consumers will believe they had real voice only if they believe the contact person was responsive. Thus, a hotel guest who waited in a long line to register might be offered a free drink as well as an apology. The study cited here suggests that even a low-cost soft drink, coffee, or iced tea may communicate more than a verbal apology. If tangible restitution simply isn't possible, the next best alternative might be to let the customer see that he or she will have some influence on future procedures. For instance, the hotel desk clerk might make a note, in front of the customer, to advise the manager, and a letter or note to the customer from the manager will communicate a serious intention to change procedure.

Managerial Implications and Recommendations

Responding to consumer complaints offers a challenge to the marketing-oriented firm. Consumer perceptions of the firm may be influenced by a firm's response even when complaints are trivial or unjustified.

People prefer high outcomes to low outcomes.

Insights from procedural fairness literature suggest that firms need to have procedures in place which will encourage consumers to believe that their complaints were handled fairly. Consumers will tend to believe they were treated fairly when they are offered compensation. When compensation cannot be offered, the firm faces the challenge of appearing responsive to consumer concerns. To appear genuinely responsive, the firm must do more than offer a rote apology or allow consumers to ventilate feelings by "letting off steam." Consumers who detect a false sense of participation or influence may experience intensified frustration. The firm can offer fairness and, ultimately, increased satisfaction by identifying consumer needs, following procedures, and, most important, demonstrating genuine concern. While tangible restitution will often enhance satisfaction, representatives of the firm can be cautioned to ask consumers what they would like and attempt to incorporate their requests into the settlement offer.

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