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Chulmin Kim, Sounghie Kim, Subin Im, Changhoon Shin,

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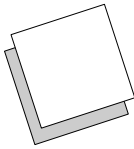
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# The effect of attitude and perception on consumer complaint intentions

**Chulmin Kim**

Assistant Professor, Department of Distribution Management,  
Sungsim College of Foreign Language, Busan, Korea

**Sounghie Kim**

Professor, Graduate School of Management, Korea Advanced Institute  
of Science and Technology, Seoul, Korea

**Subin Im**

Assistant Professor, College of Business, San Francisco State  
University, California, USA

**Changhoon Shin**

Associate Professor, Department of Logistics Engineering,  
Korea Maritime University, Busan, Korea

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**Keywords** Consumer behaviour, Complaints, Consumer marketing,  
Customer satisfaction

**Abstract** The importance of managing dissatisfied consumers has increased because of severe competition from the introduction of new types of stores, such as online shopping. Focuses on consumers who complain directly to the offending firms because their dissatisfaction provides a firm with the opportunity to improve its customer service. In contrast to studies that examine determinants of complaint behavior to resolve customer dissatisfaction, examines how attitudinal and perceptual variables, influenced by generalized personal factors, affect complaint intention. Performs a path analysis to examine the links among generalized personal antecedents, attitudinal and perceptual mediators, and customer's complaint intentions. The empirical results confirm that attitudinal and perceptual mediators positively influence complaint intention. Furthermore, three generalized personal antecedents affect attitudinal and perceptual mediators. The empirical results indicate that attitude toward complaining plays a central role in mediating between three generalized personal antecedents and complaint intention. Finally, provides managerial implications that suggest ways firms can manage customers' complaints to enhance customer satisfaction.

## Introduction

Firms can heighten their customer retention rate, protect against the diffusion of negative word-of-mouth, and minimize disadvantages by effectively managing consumers' post-purchase dissatisfaction (Tax *et al.*, 1998). Dissatisfied consumers communicate about their negative experience with an average of nine other persons, and 10 to 15 percent of a firm's sales losses can be accounted for by these dissatisfied consumers (TARP, 1981). The importance of identifying and responding to consumer complaints cannot be overstated, because firms can change consumer post-purchase behavior for the better through the analysis of the determinants of the complaint and dissatisfaction (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997). Recent research shows that most dissatisfied consumers exhibit indirect behaviors, such as negative word-of-mouth and exit, rather than complain directly to the firm (Best and Andreasen, 1977; TARP, 1986; Tschol, 1994). This makes analyzing the causes of dissatisfaction and identifying opportunities for improvement difficult. Another study suggests that complaining may increase long-term

Managing consumer  
post-purchase  
dissatisfaction



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### Current understanding of consumer complaints is limited

satisfaction by facilitating the venting of the source of dissatisfaction (Nyer, 2000). Thus, a firm needs to both encourage direct complaints from customers and manage the complaint behavior of dissatisfied consumers.

Despite the strategic importance of listening to and managing consumer complaint behavior, the current understanding of consumer complaints is limited. The marketing literature on consumer complaints has focused on identifying various determinants of consumer complaint behavior, including perceived cost (Richins, 1980), attitude toward complaining (Bearden and Mason, 1984; Singh and Wilkes, 1996), knowledge precedent (Day, 1984), controllability (Folkes, 1984), likelihood of successful complaint (Granbois *et al.*, 1977; Singh, 1990a), and environmental and demographic variables (Singh and Wilkes, 1991). Singh and Wilkes (1996) test a multi-stage model in which personal factors affect attitude toward and expected value of complaining in terms of consumer complaint behavior. Reviewing the current literature, we find the following major gaps: first, most literature focuses on identifying determinants of consumer complaint behavior. Second, the role of the attitudinal and perceptual variables has not been the focal point in explaining consumer complaint behavior, though the relationship between attitude and perception and complaint response was explored by Singh and Wilkes (1996). Third, most studies focus on complaint behavior as an outcome, which often cannot be predicted by attitude and perception. The inconsistent relationship between attitude and behavior explains why complaint behavior cannot be accounted for fully by attitudinal and perceptual variables in consumer satisfaction studies (e.g. Singh and Wilkes, 1996).

Our study aims to narrow these gaps. First, we take multiple attitudinal perspectives (i.e. attitude toward complaining, perceived value of complaint, and perceived likelihood of successful complaint) as the central constructs. Second, we examine how these attitudinal constructs mediate the relationships between generalized personal factors (i.e. alienation, prior complaint experience, and controllability) and complaint responses. Third, we examine consumer complaint intention as the outcome of consumers' attitudinal perspectives, rather than complaint behavior, because intention is much better predicted and explained by attitude than is behavior, according to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975; see also Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Fourth, we empirically test the proposed model using data collected at department stores. The importance of customer satisfaction through complaint resolution in department stores has been emphasized recently because electronic shopping, discount stores, and specialty stores threaten the retention of the customer base for department stores (Moin, 1997).

### Attitudinal and perceptual perspectives

The purpose of our study is to test empirically whether consumers' attitudinal and perceptual perspectives mediate the relationships between generalized personal factors (as antecedents) and complaint intention (as an outcome) in a department store context. To understand better how attitudinal and perceptual variables mediate generalized consumer characteristics and their complaint patterns, it is imperative to examine the intrinsic nature of complaint intention as an origin of behavior. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: in the next section, building on previous literature (Hirschman, 1970; Singh and Wilkes, 1996; Blodgett *et al.*, 1993), we develop a path model in which three personal characteristics influence attitude toward complaining, the perceived value of complaint, and the perceived likelihood of a successful complaint, which in turn affect complaint intention. Then, we discuss our data and measures before we

## Opportunity to analyze and rectify dissatisfaction

## Exit behavior is often the last resort

## Consumer alienation can affect likelihood of successful complaint

present our results. In the last section, we discuss the implications of our empirical results and outline some directions for future research.

### Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

Dissatisfied post-purchase consumers engage in several different behaviors, such as negative word-of-mouth, exit, complaint to the offending firm, appeal to a third party, or repeat purchasing as usual. Our research centers on complaint to the firm, because this behavior alone provides a firm with the opportunity to analyze and rectify the dissatisfaction (Tax *et al.*, 1998). In this article, we define consumer complaint to the firm as the consumer's protest to the firm to obtain an exchange, refund, or apology (Singh and Wilkes, 1996). More specifically, we focus on three attitudinal and perceptual variables as central constructs:

- (1) attitude toward complaining;
- (2) perceived value of complaint; and
- (3) perceived likelihood of successful complaint.

Our dependent variable is consumer complaint intention, which we define as the intention of the dissatisfied consumer to make a complaint to the firm. Our proposed model suggests that complaint intention is dependent on the three key attitudinal and perceptual variables, which are affected by three generalized personal factors: consumer alienation, prior complaint experience, and controllability (see Figure 1). The key focus of our model is how the three attitudinal and perceptual variables mediate the relationships between the three generalized personal factors and consumer complaint intention.

Hirschman's (1970) work establishes a theoretical framework for understanding consumers' dissatisfaction behaviors, such as complaint and exit. It explains why some dissatisfied customers seek redress from the retailer, whereas others silently vow never to shop there again and take their business elsewhere. Hirschman (1970) posits that consumer complaining behavior is contingent on the attitude toward complaining, value of complaint, and likelihood of success, thus providing the conceptual foundation for the inclusion of these variables as the central constructs in our proposed model. Exit behavior is often the last resort after complaint has failed (Blodgett *et al.*, 1993). Using Blodgett *et al.* (1993), who examine how the three central constructs influence complaint behaviors, and Singh and Wilkes (1996), who develop and test a model that includes attitude toward complaining and expectancy values for complaining as influenced by generalized personal factors (prior experience, alienation, and attribution of blame), we extend these frameworks with a mediating model that suggests the hypotheses that follow.

### *Generalized personal factors as antecedents of attitudinal and perceptual mediators*

We suggest that consumer alienation (Allison, 1978; Westbrook, 1980; Singh, 1989), prior complaint experience (Ursic, 1985a, b; Singh, 1989, 1990b; Singh and Wilkes, 1996), and controllability of dissatisfaction (Folkes, 1984; Singh, 1989) can affect attitude toward complaining, perceived value of complaint, and perceived likelihood of successful complaint.

*Consumer alienation.* Consumer alienation is a consumer's global negative affect toward the dissatisfying firm's industry (Singh, 1989). Generally,

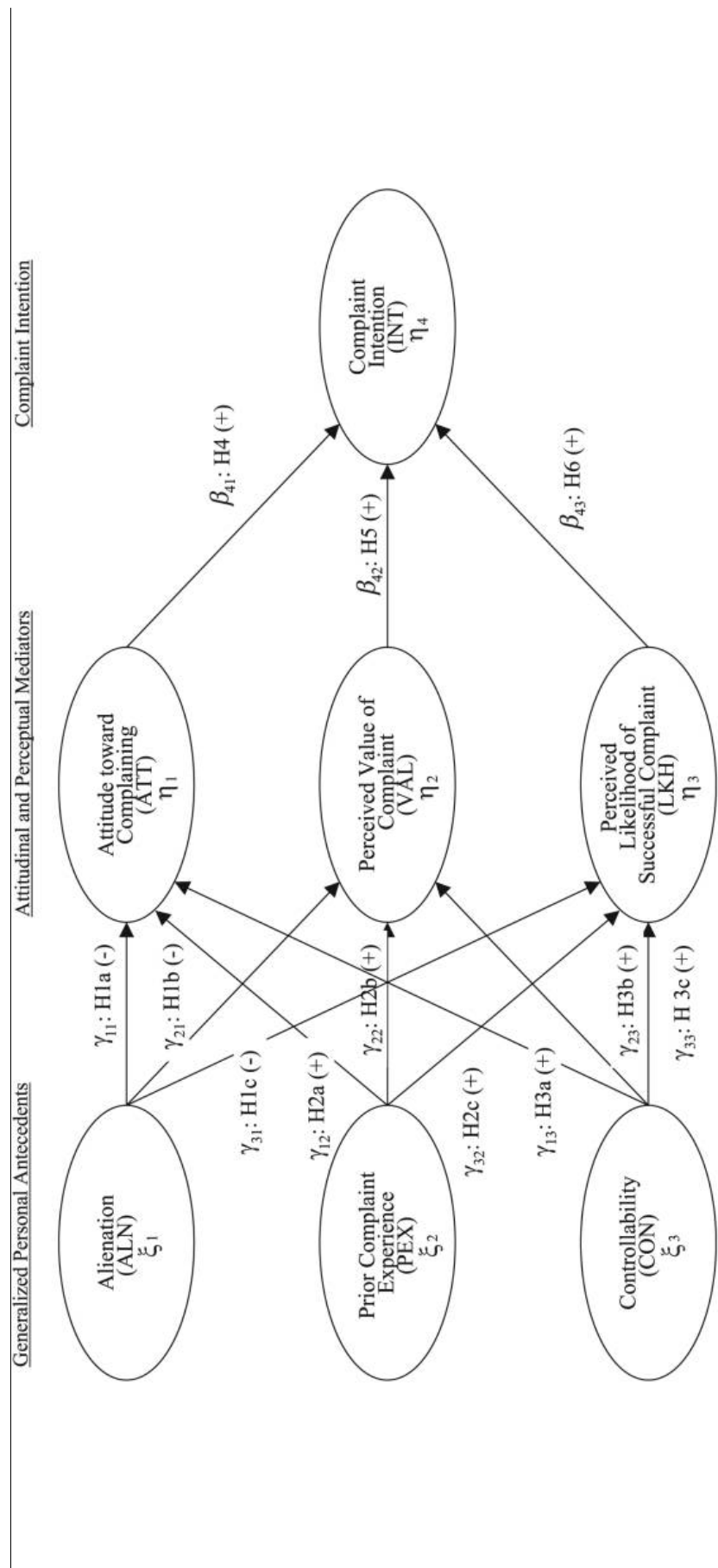


Figure 1. Hypothesized model

**Customers can develop  
more positive attitudes  
toward complaining**

consumer alienation is measured by the degree of consumer discontent, and high consumer alienation is regarded as negative feeling for the firm and its markets (Westbrook, 1980). In a broader perspective, it represents a consumer's overall feeling that the industry, including the firm and its employees, does not pay attention to consumer needs or have a true interest in consumer satisfaction. The more consumers feel alienated from the industry, including the firm, the more they may have a negative, stereotyped attitude toward the firm and its industry. Consumer alienation can also influence a consumer's expectation regarding firms (Singh and Wilkes, 1996). When consumers feel alienated from the firm and its markets, they are more likely to have helpless and powerless feeling (Allison, 1978). Thus, they may perceive both the value of complaint and the likelihood of a successful complaint as low. This alienation can result in a negative attitude toward complaint, lowered perceived value of complaint, and lowered perceived likelihood of successful complaint. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

- H1a.* The greater the consumer alienation that exists, the more negative the attitude toward complaint consumers have.
- H1b.* The greater the consumer alienation that exists, the less the perceived value of complaint consumers have.
- H1c.* The greater the consumer alienation that exists, the less the perceived likelihood of successful complaint consumers have.

*Prior complaint experience.* Prior complaint experience can be conceptualized as a consumer's tendency to appeal in the case of dissatisfaction (Singh, 1989, 1990b; Singh and Wilkes, 1996). The extent (frequent or infrequent) of past complaining experiences can reinforce a consumer's attitudinal and behavioral dispositions in future situations (Singh and Wilkes, 1996; Ursic, 1985a, b). Prior complaint experience influences attitude toward complaining. As consumers learn about the mechanisms, options, and positive outcomes of prior complaint experiences, they develop more positive attitudes toward complaining (Singh and Wilkes, 1996). In addition, those consumers who have experienced prior complaints may determine how a firm might respond to voiced complaints and the associated costs and/or benefits. Thus, the perceived value of complaint and perceived likelihood of successful complaint will be greater as the prior positive experience of complaining increases. Consequently, we posit the following:

- H2a.* The more the prior positive complaint experience consumers have, the more positive the attitude toward complaining they will have.
- H2b.* The more prior positive complaint experience consumers have, the greater perceived value of complaint they will have.
- H2c.* The more the prior positive complaint experience consumers have, the greater the perceived likelihood of successful complaining they will have.

**Ability of firms to predict  
and prevent dissatisfaction**

*Controllability.* Controllability of dissatisfaction can be conceptualized as the ability of firms to predict and prevent dissatisfaction. Folkes (1984) suggests that the perceived reason for product failure influences consumer responsibility for dissatisfaction. In Folkes's (1984) model, consumers strengthen their complaints, when they believe the problem can be controlled by the firm, to the degree that the firm could have prevented the problem. Consumers take into account controllability as the locus of responsibility for the dissatisfaction, which affects their complaint attitude and behavior. Singh

**Attitude toward complaining positively correlates with complaint intention**

**Perceived value of complaint**

(1989), in his research on the behavior of dissatisfied consumers, finds that consumers show a more positive attitude toward complaint when the responsibility for dissatisfaction falls to the firm. Singh and Wilkes (1996) suggest that a consumer's expected value for a firm's reward, such as a refund, can be affected by whether dissatisfaction is accounted for by the seller or the consumer. Consumers tend to believe that the perceived value of complaining to the firm should be high if the blame can be attributed to the firm. Thus, when consumers perceive high controllability, which means that the responsibility for dissatisfaction lies with the firm, they increase their positive attitude toward complaining, the perceived value of complaint, and the likelihood of a successful complaint. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*H3a.* The greater the feelings of controllability that consumers have, the more positive attitude toward complaint they will have.

*H3b.* The greater the feelings of controllability that consumers have, the greater the perceived value of complaint they will have.

*H3c.* The greater the feelings of controllability that consumers have, the greater the perceived likelihood of successful complaint they will have.

*Do attitudinal and perceptual variables influence complaint intention?*

*Attitude toward complaining.* Attitude toward complaining is defined as the personal tendency of dissatisfied consumers to seek compensation from the firm (Richins, 1980, 1982, 1983a, 1987; Bearden and Mason, 1984). This attitude is conceptualized as the overall affect of the "goodness" or "badness" of complaining to sellers and is not specific to a specific episode of dissatisfaction (Singh and Wilkes, 1996). Inferring from Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) attitude toward intention and behavior model, we presume that a consumer's attitude toward complaining positively correlates with complaint intention. Consumers with positive attitudes toward complaining, compared with those who are reluctant to seek redress, are less likely to engage in negative intention and behavior, such as negative word-of-mouth communication and exit (Day and Landon, 1976). Thus, those consumers who have a more favorable attitude toward complaining are more likely to express their complaint intention to the firm. For this reason, we posit the following:

*H4.* The more favorable their attitude toward complaining, the higher the complaint intention consumers have.

*Perceived value of complaint.* In this study, we define the perceived value of complaint as the personal evaluation of the gap between the benefit and the cost of complaint (Singh, 1989). This represents the consumer's belief that the complaint behavior is worth his/her effort. The potential benefits of complaint behavior include refund, exchange, or apology, whereas the costs include time and effort in making the complaint (Singh, 1989). If a consumer believes that complaining to the firm is highly instrumental in achieving some desired consequence and this consequence is perceived to provide desirable value, cognitive consistency will motivate the consumer to engage in higher complaint intention and further voice behavior (Dabholkar, 1994). Thus, consumers are more likely to exhibit complaint intention if the potential benefit of the complaint behavior is greater than the cost. We posit the following:

*H5.* A consumer's perceived value of complaint positively influences complaint intention.

## Reference point for assessment

## Customer satisfaction has become more important in department stores

*Perceived likelihood of successful complaint.* Perceived likelihood of successful complaint is defined as the perceived probability of getting a reward such as a refund, exchange, or apology through complaining to the firm (Singh, 1990a). It is well documented that the likelihood of successful complaint positively influences complaint intention (Day and Landon, 1976; Richins, 1983b, 1985, 1987; Singh 1990a, b). When consumers believe that their complaints will be accepted by the firm, they are likely to express their complaining feelings to the firm. However, if they believe that the firm does not have any interest in their complaints, they may think the complaints will be meaningless and therefore be silent and never shop there again. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*H6.* A consumer's perceived likelihood of successful complaint increases complaint intention.

## Methodology

Following Singh and Wilkes (1996), we use a critical incident approach, in that respondents were asked to recall the dissatisfying experience they could remember most clearly. This episodic elicitation has the advantages of being theoretically defensible, because dissatisfaction is an episode-specific construct; empirically sound, because it facilitates memory recall by asking respondents to resurrect a salient dissatisfying incident; and pragmatically desirable, because it provides a reference point for assessing episode-specific variables (Singh and Wilkes, 1996). However, this methodology can create undesirable bias (e.g. memory lapses, inconsistency of response) due to the nature of the retrospective response when both the complaint responses and their predictors are assessed in the same questionnaire (Landon, 1980). To overcome this limitation of the critical incident approach, our research used a modified approach in which respondents were asked to imagine that they would experience a dissatisfying situation, similar to the one they had described, on their next visit. This method, which can reduce memory bias, is supported by Scammon and Kennard (1983) and Singh and Wilkes (1996).

## Unit of analysis

Because this study examines consumers' complaint intention as a dependent variable, it includes only those dissatisfied consumers who sought redress from the retailer. Respondents were asked to report their most recent dissatisfying experience during the preceding three months while shopping at retail stores.

We collected data from customers of department stores for several reasons. First, it is easier to obtain samples because dissatisfaction rates are higher for retailers than for manufacturers (Best and Andreasen, 1977). Second, customer satisfaction has become more important in department stores since non-traditional stores, such as online shopping, discount stores, and specialty stores, have begun to threaten the existence of traditional stores (Moin, 1997). Moin (1997) suggests that more customers are dissatisfied with department stores due to inconvenient shopping, inadequate service, and non-competitive prices.

## Data collection

The data were collected during one week in April 2002. To improve response accuracy, the questionnaire was administered during face-to-face interviews by trained interviewers. A total of 276 questionnaires was distributed and collected from consumers who just finished shopping at department stores in Korea. Of these, 35 questionnaires were excluded from the sample because



## Unidimensionality

## Confirmatory factor analysis performed

of incomplete responses or a lack of dissatisfying shopping experiences in the preceding three months. Thus, 241 samples remained for the final analysis, which constitutes a 91.8 percent usable response rate. The respondents were between 20 and 40 years of age, predominantly women ( $n = 150$ , 62.4 percent), and predominantly married ( $n = 141$ , 58.4 percent). The educational levels were mostly high school graduates or higher (high school graduates:  $n = 110$ , 45.7 percent; college/university graduates:  $n = 105$ , 43.4 percent). Table I reports the descriptive statistics (i.e. means, standard deviations, and correlations) for the three antecedent variables (alienation, prior complaint experience, controllability), three mediating variables (attitude toward complaining, perceived value of complaint, perceived likelihood of successful complaint), and the dependent variable (complaint intention) used in this study.

### Measures

*Pretests.* We used existing measures for the major constructs. Prior to the main field survey, pretests were conducted with ten women in a focus group setting. The results of the pretest confirmed the adequacy of the measure instrument (i.e. wording, order, and response time), scale format, layout, and instructions. Three expert panel members reviewed the results to finalize the questionnaire for the final field survey.

The measures used for this study are summarized in the Appendix. Most of the variables, with the exception of prior complaint experiences, were measured using existing multi-item measures (Churchill, 1979). All variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale, from “1 = very unlikely” to “5 = very likely”.

*Validation of measures.* Following Churchill’s (1979) recommendations, measurement items were revised and refined using coefficient  $\alpha$ , item-to-total correlations, and exploratory factor analyses (see the Appendix for measure items and coefficient  $\alpha$ ). The two items with low item-to-total correlations (one for attitude toward complaint behavior and another for controllability) were deleted from the final measurement instruments. The deletion provides unidimensionality of the measures because the two deleted items do not belong to the constructs they were intended to assess (Churchill, 1979).

The results for internal consistency using coefficient  $\alpha$  (i.e. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ ) confirm that the measures of the major constructs exhibit good reliabilities, and all coefficient  $\alpha$ s reported in the Appendix surpass Nunnally’s (1978) 0.70 criteria for reliability acceptability. In addition, exploratory factor analysis using principal component extraction with Varimax rotation was conducted on the measures of the major constructs, and the results are reported in Table II. All measurement items load distinctively on the subjective underlying constructs, which indicates that they were clearly grouped and operationalized to measure the major constructs. The final six-factor solution explains 62.3 percent of the total variance.

In addition, we performed confirmatory factor analysis on the measures, in accordance with Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) two-step approach, in which the estimation of a confirmatory measurement model precedes the estimation of a structural model. The high goodness-of-fit indices (greater than 0.90) indicate a good fit, and all measurement items load positively and significantly on the subjective constructs at the 0.05 level, thus confirming good convergent validity (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988).

	Complaint intention (INT)	Attitude toward complaining (ATT)	Value of Complaint (VAL)	Likelihood of successful complaint (LKH)	Alienation (ALN)	Prior complaint experience (PEX)	Controllability (CON)
INT	1.00						
ATT	0.41 <sup>**</sup>	1.00					
VAL	0.25 <sup>**</sup>	0.19 <sup>**</sup>	1.00				
LKH	0.28 <sup>**</sup>	0.01	0.21 <sup>**</sup>	1.00			
ALN	-0.11	-0.16 <sup>*</sup>	0.08	-0.15 <sup>*</sup>	1.00		
PEX	0.19 <sup>**</sup>	0.23 <sup>**</sup>	0.15 <sup>*</sup>	-0.02	-0.01	1.00	
CON	0.15 <sup>*</sup>	0.22 <sup>**</sup>	0.14 <sup>*</sup>	0.10	0.10	0.15 <sup>*</sup>	1.00
Mean	3.55	3.14	3.18	3.19	2.98	3.47	3.95
Standard deviation	0.91	0.81	1.09	0.87	0.61	1.06	0.97
<b>Notes:</b> <i>n</i> = 241; <sup>*</sup> Significant at <i>p</i> < 0.05; <sup>**</sup> Significant at <i>p</i> < 0.01 (all significance tests are based on two-tailed <i>t</i> -test)							

Table I. Correlations, mean and standard deviation

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
ALN1	0.72	0.08	0.04	-0.08	-0.08	-0.19
ALN5	0.65	-0.04	-0.01	-0.05	-0.02	-0.03
ALN3	0.65	-0.01	0.13	0.08	-0.27	-0.20
ALN4	0.63	0.13	-0.30	-0.11	0.12	0.18
ALN6	0.62	0.08	-0.20	-0.21	0.14	0.22
ALN7	0.55	0.15	-0.31	-0.24	0.20	0.23
ALN2	0.50	-0.09	0.04	0.12	-0.02	0.16
VAL2	-0.01	0.91	0.08	0.14	0.04	0.02
VAL1	0.05	0.86	0.03	0.03	0.22	0.02
VAL3	0.04	0.84	0.15	0.08	-0.02	0.09
LKH2	-0.07	0.03	0.86	-0.04	0.08	-0.01
LKH3	-0.02	0.17	0.80	-0.03	0.02	0.16
LKH1	-0.05	0.08	0.73	-0.05	0.26	0.03
ATT2	-0.01	0.18	0.12	0.74	0.14	-0.01
ATT1	0.11	0.14	0.02	0.73	0.28	0.12
ATT4	-0.23	0.02	-0.19	0.70	0.18	0.04
ATT5	-0.17	-0.05	-0.14	0.52	0.08	0.29
INT2	0.01	0.20	0.14	0.22	0.81	0.02
INT1	-0.09	0.02	0.03	0.18	0.69	-0.05
INT3	-0.03	0.03	0.37	0.30	0.66	0.12
CON2	0.09	0.09	0.05	0.08	0.02	0.85
CON1	0.02	0.01	0.12	0.18	-0.01	0.81

**Notes:** Factors were extracted by the principal component analysis and Varimax rotation methods. Extraction criteria all had eigenvalues greater than 1

Table II. Exploratory factor analysis

## Results

We used a path model in LISREL (Jöreskog and Sorbom, 1982, 1990) to estimate the hypothesized relationships. The equations for the path model are:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{ATT}(\eta_1) &= \gamma_{11} \text{ALN}(\xi_1) + \gamma_{12} \text{PEX}(\xi_2) + \gamma_{13} \text{CON}(\xi_3) + \xi_1 \\
 \text{VAL}(\eta_2) &= \gamma_{21} \text{ALN}(\xi_1) + \gamma_{22} \text{PEX}(\xi_2) + \gamma_{23} \text{CON}(\xi_3) + \xi_2 \\
 \text{LKH}(\eta_3) &= \gamma_{31} \text{ALN}(\xi_1) + \gamma_{32} \text{PEX}(\xi_2) + \gamma_{33} \text{CON}(\xi_3) + \xi_3 \\
 \text{INT}(\eta_4) &= \beta_{41} \text{ATT}(\eta_1) + \beta_{42} \text{VAL}(\eta_2) + \beta_{43} \text{LKH}(\eta_3) + \xi_4
 \end{aligned}$$

The maximum likelihood estimation results with standardized coefficients are reported in Table III.

## Model exhibits a good fit with the data

The overall model fit was estimated. Because the chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 19.8$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) indicates a possible lack of overall fit, we follow the recommendations of Bagozzi and Phillips (1982) and Tanaka (1993) and use multiple fit indices to assess the goodness of fit. The fit indices show that the model exhibits a good fit with the data (goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.98, adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = 0.90, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.90, incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.91, root mean square residual (RMR) = 0.047). Furthermore, an AGFI and CFI above 0.90 and a Q-plot slope of standardized residuals support the appropriateness of the model (Hair *et al.*, 1995).

Square multiple correlations (equivalent to  $R^2$ ) show that 46 percent of the variance in complaint intention is explained by the three attitudinal and perceptual mediators. The three generalized personal factors explain

Hypotheses	Parameters	Standardized coefficients	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
<i>H1a</i>	$\gamma_{11}$ (ALN $\rightarrow$ ATT)	-0.33	-3.10	< 0.05
<i>H1b</i>	$\gamma_{21}$ (ALN $\rightarrow$ VAL)	0.10	0.65	ns
<i>H1c</i>	$\gamma_{31}$ (ALN $\rightarrow$ LKH)	-0.30	-2.45	< 0.05
<i>H2a</i>	$\gamma_{12}$ (PEX $\rightarrow$ ATT)	0.15	3.29	< 0.01
<i>H2b</i>	$\gamma_{22}$ (PEX $\rightarrow$ VAL)	0.13	1.92	ns
<i>H2c</i>	$\gamma_{32}$ (PEX $\rightarrow$ LKH)	-0.04	-0.71	ns
<i>H3a</i>	$\gamma_{13}$ (CON $\rightarrow$ ATT)	0.26	3.57	< 0.01
<i>H3b</i>	$\gamma_{23}$ (CON $\rightarrow$ VAL)	0.22	2.16	< 0.05
<i>H3c</i>	$\gamma_{33}$ (CON $\rightarrow$ LKH)	0.17	2.06	< 0.05
<i>H4</i>	$\beta_{41}$ (ATT $\rightarrow$ INT)	0.61	6.78	< 0.01
<i>H5</i>	$\beta_{42}$ (VAL $\rightarrow$ INT)	0.11	2.10	< 0.05
<i>H6</i>	$\beta_{43}$ (LKH $\rightarrow$ INT)	0.31	4.35	< 0.01

**Notes:** ns = not sufficient. Fit statistics:  $\chi^2 = 19.8$  (df = 6),  $p < 0.01$ , GFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.90, IFI = 0.91; RMR = 0.047. Squared multiple correlations ( $R^2$ ): attitude toward complaining ( $\eta_1$ ): 0.22, value of complaint ( $\eta_2$ ): 0.06, likelihood of successful complaint ( $\eta_3$ ): 0.06, complaint intention ( $\eta_4$ ): 0.46

Table III. Estimation results path model

22 percent of the attitude toward complaining and 6 percent each of the perceived value of complaint and perceived likelihood of successful complaint respectively.

The results of the hypotheses (*H1a-H1c*) regarding the influence of alienation ( $\xi_1$ ) on the attitude toward complaint ( $\eta_1$ ), perceived value of complaint ( $\eta_2$ ), and perceived likelihood of successful complaining ( $\eta_3$ ) are mixed. *H1a* is supported (standardized  $\gamma_{11} = -0.33$ ,  $t = -3.10$ ), which suggests that a greater level of consumer alienation leads to a poorer attitude toward complaining. *H1c* is also supported (standardized  $\gamma_{31} = -0.30$ ,  $t = -2.45$ ), which suggests that a greater level of consumer alienation leads to poorer perceived likelihood of successful complaint. However, *H1b* is rejected; alienation has no significant, direct effect on perceived value of complaint (standardized  $\gamma_{21} = 0.10$ ,  $t = 0.65$ ).

#### Prior complaint experience

The second hypothesis (*H2a-H2c*) examines the influence of prior complaint experience ( $\xi_2$ ) on the attitude toward complaining ( $\eta_1$ ), perceived value of complaint ( $\eta_2$ ), and perceived likelihood of successful complaint ( $\eta_3$ ), and the results again are mixed. *H2a* is supported by our empirical results (standardized  $\gamma_{12} = 0.15$ ,  $t = 3.29$ ), which indicates that a greater level of prior complaint experience leads to a more positive attitude toward complaint. However, *H2b* and *H2c* are not supported (standardized  $\gamma_{22} = 0.13$ ,  $t = 1.92$ ; standardized  $\gamma_{32} = -0.04$ ,  $t = -0.71$ , respectively). Thus, the level of prior complaint experience does not influence the perceived value of complaint and perceived likelihood of successful complaint.

*H3* examines the impact of controllability ( $\xi_3$ ) on the attitudinal and perceptual variables. *H3a*, the influence of controllability ( $\xi_3$ ) on the attitude toward complaining ( $\eta_1$ ) is supported (standardized  $\gamma_{13} = 0.26$ ,  $t = 3.57$ ), as is *H3b*, the influence of controllability on the perceived value of complaint ( $\eta_2$ ) (standardized  $\gamma_{23} = 0.22$ ,  $t = 2.16$ ), and *H3c*, the influence of controllability on perceived likelihood of successful complaint ( $\eta_3$ ) (standardized  $\gamma_{33} = 0.17$ ,  $t = 2.06$ ). These results indicate that controllability is the antecedent of attitude toward complaint, perceived value of complaint, and perceived likelihood of successful complaint.

### Three attitudinal and perceptual variables

### Mediating role

*H4*, the influence of attitude toward complaining ( $\eta_1$ ) on complaint intention ( $\eta_4$ ) (standardized  $\beta_{41} = 0.61$ ,  $t = 6.78$ ); *H5*, the influence of perceived value of complaint ( $\eta_2$ ) on the complaint intention ( $\eta_4$ ) (standardized  $\beta_{42} = 0.11$ ,  $t = 2.10$ ); and *H6*, the influence of perceived likelihood of successful complaint ( $\eta_3$ ) on complaint intention ( $\eta_4$ ) (standardize  $\beta_{43} = 0.31$ ,  $t = 4.35$ ) are all supported. We therefore conclude that complaint intention is positively influenced by increases in favorable attitude toward complaining, the perceived value of the complaint, and the perceived likelihood of successful complaint. A noteworthy finding is that attitude toward complaining has the strongest influence (standardized  $\beta_{41} = 0.61$ ) on complaint intention.

### Discussion

This research focuses on how attitudinal and perceptual variables, as influenced by three generalized personal factors, enhance complaint intention. The hypothesized relationships were empirically tested, and the results confirm that complaint intention is positively influenced by the three key mediating variables and that the generalized personal factors as antecedents are somewhat related to each of the mediating variables (except for three of the nine paths we tested).

The most critical finding is that the three attitudinal and perceptual variables – attitude toward complaining, perceived value of complaint, and perceived likelihood of successful complaints – significantly and substantially enhance complaint intentions. Consistent with Singh and Wilkes's (1996) study, which examines complaint behavior as the dependent variable, our study indicates that complaint intention as the dependent variable is well predicted by attitudinal and perceptual variables. This claim is strongly supported by the high squared multiple correlation value of complaint intention ( $SMC = 0.46$ ), which indicates that 46 percent of the total variance in complaint intention is accounted for by the three attitudinal and perceptual variables. The link between attitudinal and perceptual variables and complaint behavior can be often confounded because complaint behavior can be influenced by environmental and situational factors (e.g. income, age, risk-taking propensity) that may differ from one consumer to another. However, complaint intention provides a clear indication that attitude and perceived values related to complaining and its expected success significantly predict a consumer's intention to complain without influence from external environmental and situational factors.

In addition, the standardized coefficients show that the impact of attitude toward complaining (standardized  $\beta = 0.61$ ) on complaint intention is stronger than those of perceived value of complaint (standardized  $\beta = 0.11$ ) and perceived likelihood of successful complaint (standardized  $\beta = 0.31$ ). Therefore, the link between attitude toward complaining and complaint intention is stronger than that between perceived value of complaint and its likelihood of success.

Another important finding pertains to the mediating role of attitudinal and perceptual factors in explaining the relationships between generalized personal antecedents (i.e. alienation, prior complaint experience, and controllability) and complaint intention. In contrast to most models of consumer complaints, which focus on examining the determinants of complaint behavior, our model confirms that generalized personal antecedents influence attitudinal and perceptual mediators and thereby explain compliant intention as a dependent variable. Because the positive

**Alienation significantly and negatively influences attitude toward complaining**

impact of attitudinal and perceptual mediators on complaint intention is confirmed, these mediators should be enhanced to improve generalized personal factors.

Our results suggest that alienation significantly and negatively influences attitude toward complaining and perceived likelihood of successful complaint, but it has no impact on perceived value of complaint. This result implies that consumers rather develop negative attitudes toward complaining and perceived likelihood of successful complaint when the industry that includes the firm subject to the complaint does not pay attention to customers' needs and expectations. However, the lack of relationship between alienation and perceived value of complaint shows that consumers alienated from the firm and industry do not value their complaints because they have already developed helpless and powerless feelings (Allison, 1978). This lack of relationship also might be attributed to the specific industry we chose (i.e. department stores), in that Singh and Wilkes (1996) find a negative link for samples from the automotive repair, medical care, and banking industries.

In examining prior complaint experience as an antecedent, our results suggest that prior complaint experience positively influences attitude toward complaining, though it does not affect either perceived value of complaint or perceived likelihood of successful complaint. Therefore, a consumer's tendency to appeal after a dissatisfying purchase experience only influences the attitude toward future complaining, not necessarily the consumer's perception of the value of complaint or the likelihood of successful complaint. The lack of support for these perceptual variables can be attributed to the operationalization of prior complaint experience as the frequency of prior complaints rather than the types and intensity of them.

Finally, we find that controllability positively influences all three dimensions of attitudinal and perceptual mediators. When consumers believe that their problems and dissatisfaction can be controlled by a firm a priori, they enhance their attitude toward complaining, perceived likelihood of complaint, and perceived likelihood of successful complaint, which eventually increases complaint intention. For complaints and dissatisfied purchases that can be controlled by a firm, consumers heighten attitude toward complaining and perceive a high value of complaint or likelihood of success of the complaint because they believe the locus of responsibility is the firm, which results in enhanced complaint intention. However, they do not increase their attitude toward complaining, the perceived value of complaint, or likelihood of successful complaint for uncontrollable complaints, because they do not fully attribute the locus of responsibility to the firm. Thus, when consumers believe their complaints are uncontrollable by the firm, they are not able to ensure the value of voicing or the success of such voicing to the firm.

**Firms should manage generalized personal factors in their favor**

In examining the role of attitudinal and perceptual variables, one interesting finding is the mediating role of attitude toward complaining. Compared with the perceived value of complaint and likelihood of successful complaint, attitude toward complaining is strongly influenced by all three antecedents. The comparison of squared multiple correlation values confirms that the three antecedents are better predictors of the attitude toward complaining ( $SMC = 0.22$ ) than of perceived value of complaint ( $SMC = 0.06$ ) or perceived likelihood of successful complaint ( $SMC = 0.06$ ). This result, combined with a strong influence of attitude toward complaining on complaint intention, suggests that firms should manage generalized personal

**Firms must make and implement service improvement efforts**

factors in their favor, because it plays the central and critical role in developing future complaint intention.

*Managerial implications*

Marketing managers should develop more effective marketing strategies for increasing consumer satisfaction by understanding the mediating role of attitudinal and perceptual variables related to consumer complaint. First and most important, firms should realize that a consumer's favorable attitude toward complaining can heighten complaint intention. Consistent with the literature (Allison, 1978; Bearden and Mason, 1984), we confirm that a consumer's attitude toward complaining is influenced by generalized personality orientations, such as alienation, prior complaint experience, and locus of control. In addition, it can be enhanced by educating consumers about mechanisms and options of complaining (Singh and Wilkes, 1996). To improve the consumer's attitude toward complaining, firms must make and implement long-term oriented and consistent service improvement efforts for complaint resolution, because the consumer's attitude toward complaint essentially cannot be changed in a short time.

Second, firms must increase the perceived value of complaint for the dissatisfied consumers by minimizing the consumer's feeling of alienation or improving controllability. Perceived value of complaint also might be enhanced by lowering the perceived cost or increasing perceived benefits. By providing more speedy and suitable refund or exchange services, firms might heighten their consumers' perceptions of economic and time benefits. For example, firms could simplify the exchange and refund procedures or provide employee education regarding quick and efficient complaint resolution services. In addition, firms must provide extra incentives (e.g. coupons, discounts) for the time and effort consumers spend on their complaints, because the high perceived value of complaint improves complaint intention for those who have a high likelihood to return as repeat customers.

**Firms should make it easy for dissatisfied consumers to complain**

Third, managers must heighten the perceived likelihood of successful complaint by providing various complaining channels for their consumers, as well as by enhancing controllability. Firms should make it easy for dissatisfied consumers to complain, for example, by offering a toll-free telephone number, online customer service, consumer suggestion box, or customer voicing center.

Fourth, because we find strong, positive links between attitudinal and perceptual mediators and complaint intention, firms must understand how to improve these mediators by enhancing generalized personal antecedents. For example, firms must find ways to encourage alienated consumers to develop a positive attitude toward complaining and a positive perceived likelihood of successful complaint. Firms could implement customer-oriented services and strategies. For this, firms must ensure the firm's responsiveness to customers by providing fast and polite customer services and consistent follow-through on complaints. In addition, because controllability is an important antecedent of attitude and perception related to complaint, firms should encourage consumers to perceive controllability. For this, firms must show their consumers that they are willing to admit fault and respond to consumers' complaints.

Fifth, the most important finding is that attitude toward complaining, as influenced by alienation, prior complaint experience, and controllability, plays a central role in strongly and positively influencing complaint

intention. Because attitude toward complaining cannot be developed quickly, firms must change their corporate culture over time, motivate employees to facilitate customers' expressions of complaint, and increase their willingness to listen to customers.

#### *Limitations and future research*

This study is subject to several limitations. First, our findings are limited to the specific sample. The restriction of our sample frame to department stores somewhat minimizes the generalizability of the results. Further studies are needed to examine the proposed framework in a broader range of industries that might include non-traditional stores, such as discount stores, convenience stores, and online shopping. Second, our suggested model is constrained by the limited number of variables. Future study might include more potential generalized personal antecedents, such as self-confidence, self-monitoring, assertiveness, or locus of control (Allison, 1978; Bearden and Mason, 1984). In addition, the relationship among attitude, intention, and behavior in relation to complaint should be clarified to provide a comprehensive perspective of the cognitive and behavioral elements of complaint.

Third, this study is limited by the operationalization of the major constructs using existing measures. Because our study is specific to a type of business, a few measurement items for major constructs were dropped to ensure unidimensionality, reliability, and validity. Future study should develop measure instruments that can be used to assess the major constructs in varied and broad industries.

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#### **Appendix. Measurement of variables**

*Alienation (five-point scale, adapted from Allison, 1978; Singh, 1990a, b)*

ALN1: I think most retailers do not care about their consumers.

ALN2: I think most shopping experiences are not pleasant to me.

ALN3: I think consumers cannot influence retailers' product management.

ALN4: I think most retailers are not honest with their consumers.

ALN5: I think consumers are not important to most retailers.

ALN6: I think most retailers usually forget about consumers after selling their products.

ALN7: I think most retailers do neglect their product warranties.

Cronbach's alpha: 0.75.

Mean: 2.98, standard deviation: 0.61.

*Prior complaint experience (five-point scale, adapted from Singh, 1989, 1990b)*

PEX: How many times have you complained about your dissatisfaction to a retailer within the last three months?

Mean: 3.47, standard deviation: 1.06.

*Controllability (five-point scale, adapted from Blodgett et al., 1993; Folkes, 1984; Singh and Wilkes, 1996)*

CON1: The retailer could prevent my unsatisfactory purchase experience.

CON2: If the retailer paid more attention, my unsatisfactory experience would not have occurred.

CON3: My unsatisfactory purchase experience was my own responsibility.<sup>®</sup>

Cronbach's alpha: 0.72 (CON3 deleted).

Mean: 3.95, standard deviation: 0.97.

*Attitude toward complaint behavior (five-point scale, adapted from Blodgett, 1994; Richins, 1982, 1983b, 1987; Singh, 1989, 1990b; Singh and Wilkes, 1996)*

ATT1: Not complaining about unsatisfactory products or services makes me uneasy.

ATT2: It is my duty to complain about unsatisfactory products or services.

ATT3: People should not complain because firms sometimes sell unsatisfactory products or services.<sup>®</sup>

ATT4: I rarely complain when products or services are unsatisfactory.<sup>®</sup>

ATT5: Rather than exchanging the product or getting a refund, I usually use the unsatisfactory product if it is not so expensive.<sup>®</sup>

Cronbach's alpha: 0.71 (ATT3 deleted).

Mean: 3.14, standard deviation: 0.81.

*Perceived value of complaint behavior (five-point scale, adapted from Bagozzi, 1982; Richins, 1980; Singh, 1989, 1990b)*

VAL1: If you believe the retailer will take appropriate action (e.g. exchange, refund, apology, reward), will you complain about your dissatisfaction to the retailer?

VAL2: If you believe the retailer will take appropriate action and give better service in the future, will you complain about your dissatisfaction to the retailer?

VAL3: If you believe the retailer will give better service in the future and this will also benefit other consumers, will you complain about your dissatisfaction to the retailer?

Cronbach's alpha: 0.87.

Mean: 3.18, standard deviation: 0.109.

*Perceived likelihood of successful complaint (five-point scale, adapted from Day et al., 1981; Richins, 1983a; Singh, 1990a, b)*

LKH1: If you complain about your dissatisfaction to the retailer, the retailer will take appropriate action (e.g. exchange, refund, apology, reward).

LKH2: If you complain about your dissatisfaction to the retailer, the retailer will take appropriate action and will give better service in the future.

LKH3: If you complain about your dissatisfaction to the retailer, the retailer will give better service in the future and this will also benefit other consumers.

Cronbach's alpha: 0.80.

Mean: 3.19, standard deviation: 0.87

*Complaint intention (five-point scale, adapted from Day et al., 1981; Singh, 1989)*

INT1: I will forget the unsatisfactory experience and not complain any more.<sup>®</sup>

INT2: I will complain to the employee or manager right after (or on my next visit to the store) experiencing dissatisfaction (or on my next visit to the store).

INT3: I will make the retailer take proper action right after experiencing the dissatisfaction.

Cronbach's alpha: 0.73

Mean: 3.55, standard deviation: 0.91.

<sup>®</sup> Reverse coded items.



*This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present*

## **Executive summary and implications for managers and executives**

### ***I am not a masochist but please complain!***

*We complain when we do not get very good service or when the product we have just bought does not work or does not do what we expected. The problem for managers is that we do not complain to the firm, we complain to our wives and children, to our mates down the pub, to the folk at work, to anybody who will listen. This complaint behaviour represents a real challenge for firms that wish to improve their customer service, get feedback about products and reduce the negative effects of all that sounding off about the product or service.*

*Kim, Kim, Im and Shin argue that despite the importance of complaints too little is understood about complaint behaviour from the attitudinal and perceptual perspectives. We are encouraged to recognise complaints, to respond positively to them and even to encourage them but we do not appreciate the motivational factors that will make the dissatisfied customer complain to us – giving us the chance to respond – rather to anybody but us.*

### ***The confident consumer***

*Consumers are not always especially confident. Complaining involves confronting another person and, for many of us, the problem we have encountered is not worth that confrontation. We would rather walk away (and, sadly for the business concerned, probably never come back again). While circumstances, the degree of “hurt” and other environmental factors may mitigate this tendency not to complain, without encouragement from the business people will not complain – or they will complain in an unhelpful way.*

*The opportunity to contact the business with concerns, questions and complaints has long been recognised as an important tool for improving customer service and securing greater loyalty or satisfaction. In our communications we need to make clear that we will not be offended by you complaining – we want to hear what you think. But as well as the equivalent of the waiter asking whether your meal is OK, we need complain channels that are more anonymous or distant. This distance allows people to plan and execute complaints without feeling that they are confronting the service provider directly.*

### ***Getting the right response***

*Another reason that people do not complain is a feeling that doing so is pointless. The problem will not be sorted out, the firm will give a load of excuses and it will all be a load of hassle. Put simply, the greater the chance of a positive, satisfying response, the greater the chance of me complaining. Even where satisfaction is hard to provide, the organisation can be positive in responding to what the customer is saying. Sometimes this is hard. UK local councils (usually) encourage local residents to complain if they encounter a problem with services. The problem comes when people complain because, for example, the council has granted permission for a builder to construct 50 new homes on the field at the back of somebody's house – the problem cannot be solved!*

*Nevertheless, it is important for firms to advertise their complaint handling arrangements, to make explicit their policies relating to dissatisfaction (refunds, like-for-like replacement, discounts etc.) and to ensure that customers have the chance to raise concerns at a time and place convenient*

to the customer. Many department stores used to have their complaints and returns departments in the most inaccessible part of the store – it almost seemed as if the object was to make it less likely for customers to use the service! We can contrast this with the returns policies of stores like Marks & Spencer or Nordstrom where bringing back goods is accepted and customers see the policy as a service – even as a reason to go to that store rather than another.

### ***Will complaining be worth the effort?***

Firms have to make complaining worthwhile. If this is not the case then the customer will not bother to make the effort (unless of course that customer is very, very cross). Again stores especially see returns and related complaints as a threat and set about introducing policies that make indulging in such activity less than worthwhile. The returns policy or complaints process is riddled with negatives and caveats – excuses for not giving good service or good quality – rather than providing a positive reason to tell the firm what's wrong.

Such approaches are short-sighted since they discourage people from complaining, prevent you from resolving the customer's problem and are likely to result in less content customers (or possibly no customers at all). This problem can be further exacerbated by what Kim et al. call “consumer alienation” – the “overall feeling that the industry, including the firm and its employees, does not pay attention to consumer needs or have a true interest in consumer satisfaction”. Such circumstances (I have been pretty rude about retailers but they are among the best at handling complaints – just try the bank) make it even more difficult for the firm to get customers to complain – they do not like confrontation, it is a load of hassle and you do not care anyway!

### ***It is worth the effort***

Kim et al. point out that 10-15 per cent of a firm's sales losses can be laid at the door of unsatisfied complaints or other post-purchase dissonance. Reducing the numbers of your customers that leave through unsatisfied complaints (that you probably did not know about) represents an important way to protect profitability, improve customer service and produce more loyal customers. It is not hard to do, it is not expensive and it will have a bigger impact on your business than many of the much more expensive things you are planning next year!

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