

Customer complaining behaviour – its effects on companies' evolution

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Abstract

Now days the role of the consumer in the economy is taken very seriously and, in some cases, we can easily talk about the consumer's "supremacy". All the efforts of the companies are concentrated on the consumers and finding the best way to attract them, but gaining their trust and building a long-term relationship is even more difficult now due to a very intense competition on all the markets. Client service can always help a company to differentiate itself from the others, this including the management of customer complaints. The subject is still very sensible because many consumers are not aware of the complaining system or are shy in displaying this kind of behaviour, so companies can develop strategies to educate and council clients regarding the complaining process, managing in this way to gain trust and also to increase profitability.

Keywords

Behaviour, complaints, consumer, satisfaction, politeness, service quality

JEL Codes: M 31

Introduction

The most common goal of companies worldwide is increasing their business and, of course, increasing their profitability. One way to achieve this goal is learning as much as they can about consumers and their behaviour on the market. The older, more selfish view of certain companies does not represent anymore a direction to be followed by the ones who want to meet success.

The study of the behavioural process of consumers has revealed a very important subject: the complaining behaviour of the consumers and its effects on businesses.

The consumer complaining behaviour refers to the set of actions and attitudes that a customer relies on when confronting with a problem caused by a product or service that he has acquired a problem associated with the manufacturer or seller. Once he acknowledges the problem, the consumer decides how to solve it, by expressing his situation to the provider, or worse, to other potential clients.

Academics consider that the complaints of the consumers can be a very useful source of information for companies in making strategic and tactical decisions with the purpose of improving their business.¹

Further in this article, the development of complaining behaviour will be described, including the different types of this behaviour and also the factors that influence its release. An interesting point of view which will be detailed is the relationship between politeness and the complaining process.

Another point taken in consideration will be the relationship between the complaining behaviour and the degree of the customer's satisfaction.

¹ Apud Nyer, U. P. (2000), *An investigation into whether complaining can cause increased customer satisfaction*, Journal of Consumer Marketing, vol.17, nr.1, p. 9.

Last, but not least, some pieces of advice to be taken in consideration by companies will be offered as a conclusion of the complaining behaviour theoretical approach.

The development of the complaining behaviour

In the specialized literature, complaining behaviour is defined as „ a set of possible responses to perceived dissatisfaction, regarding a bill of sale or during the consumption/use of goods or services.”². This type of behaviour arises when consumers are faced with the inconvenience caused by an item that does not work as it should, or a faulty service without fault. Most of the times, the blame is cast upon the manufacturer or vendor who supplied that item/service.

The complaining behaviour can take many forms, depending on what the client decides to do, in order to remedy the situation. The first type of behaviour is exactly the absence of it. Some clients, because of the time shortage or the fact that they do not have the courage to approach the seller, prefer not to take any position regarding the specific situation. Most of the times, the reason for the lack of attitude is represented by the fact that companies do not encourage their customers to express their grievances, and the latter prefer not to remedy the situation, in order to avoid an embarrassing position.

A second type of behaviour relates to the so-called „private action”³. Consumers are clearly dissatisfied with inconveniences produced by a certain company, but, for various reasons (which will be examined below), they prefer to boycott the company, from a personal level, by means of negative advertising towards friends, family, other potential customers or cease to purchase products/services from that company.

The last, but most complex category is represented by the customers’ decision to make their dissatisfaction public. This action can, itself, take two forms: the customer’s willingness to remedy the predicament (by replacing or repairing the product), or simply reclaiming the situation. This second form refers to the desire to make their discontent public, only to free themselves from negative feelings (may be the most dangerous, by using the press, authorities etc.)

Experts have identified two categories of people who carry the complaining behaviour: complainers and non-complainers⁴. The complainers are always eager and more aggressive both in language, and conduct. Non-complainers are shy and calm. Studies have demonstrated that the applicants have a better control of situations, while non-applicants perceive such control as very low.

Linked to this type of people that make complaints, a strong mitigating factor which influences the consumer’s behaviour in general, is the image of him self. Many aspects of a person’s self image can be found in specialized literature⁵:

- Current self-image
- Ideal self-image (how the consumer wants to see himself)
- Social self-image (how he thinks others perceive him)
- Ideal social image (how he would like to be seen by others)

These hypostasis of the self image, especially the ideal social image, lead to a restraint in expressing the complaining behaviour, just for keeping an image they want in society. Some people perceive this conduct as being rather embarrassing, due to a very low self-esteem.

² Apud Phau, I., Baird, M. (2008), *Complainers versus non-complainers retaliatory responses towards service dissatisfactions*, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, vol. 26, nr. 6, p. 588.

³ Apud Twigg-Flesner, C. (2003), *Consumer product guarantees*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., p.74.

⁴ Bodey, K., Grace D. (2006), *Segmenting service “complainers” and “non-complainers” on the basis of consumer characteristics*, Journal of Services Marketing, vol. 20, nr. 3, p. 179.

⁵ Statt, A.D. (1997), *Understanding the Consumer: a Psychological Approach*, MacMillan Press Ltd., p.72.

Of course, the complaining behaviour may be influenced by a multitude of other factors. One of these factors is the function. The predicament is considered short-termed and then does not require too much effort to move it. If dissatisfaction is attributed to the manufacturer, the client will express his desire to remedy the issue, using one of the forms described below.

Another category of influencing factors is represented by the ones determined by circumstance. Some of these factors can be:

- The price of the item
- Low life
- Severity of the problem
- Perceived inconvenient of a complaint mechanism
- Perceived willingness of a seller to provide a remedy.

According to experts, the intention of making a complaint is significantly influenced by three factors⁶: attitude toward complaining, perceived value of complaint and perceived likelihood of success. The attitude toward complaints can be positive or negative. The consumer may consider that the claim will solve the problem, and then, will adopt a positive attitude, asking the manufacturer/seller to resolve the situation. But when the consumer has a negative attitude, this is not beneficial either for business, or the consumer (does not eliminate the cause of frustrations that might arise).

The perceived value of the complaint relates to the importance given by the consumer to the caused dissatisfaction and default, to the complaint he should do. If the importance is not very high, it is unlikely for the complaining process to be followed through. But if the sufferer attaches more importance to his gesture to claim, he will surely choose a method whereby to express, public or private.

The chance of success for his approach or its perception as being likely or not to turn up right, often appears as influential in the development of complaining behaviour. An important part is played by the company, on how it encourages its customers to voice their complaints. How the company responds, or not, can determine the direction for the consumer's display.

In terms of area segmentation regarding the complaining behaviour's display, demographic factors (age, income, level of education) can significantly influence this conduct.

The complaining behaviour is in inverse relation to age and directly proportional to income and education⁷. Young people with high incomes and a higher level of education are more likely to make public their complaints. Other recent studies have proven that women are more interested in how the company handles complaints, while men are very keen to reach a quick result⁸.

Cultural factors can not be ignored, as it has been shown that cultural influence exercises its role on the complaining behaviour. In some studies, conducted between 2000-2001, has been found that those consumers from collectivist cultures (such as in South Korea) are more prone to action than those in individualistic cultures (USA)⁹.

So, we could say that consumers from collectivist cultures tend to be more timid in regard to public complaints, but this could be related, psychologically speaking, to the image they would want to project in society.

⁶In Kim, C., Kim, S., Im, S., Shin, C. (2003), *The effect of attitude and perception on consumer complaint intentions*, Journal of Consumer Marketing, vol. 20, nr. 4.

⁷Apud Phau, I., Baird, M. (2008), *Complainers versus non-complainers retaliatory responses towards service dissatisfactions*, Marketing Intelligence and Planning, vol. 26, nr. 6, p. 590.

⁸Gruber, T., Szmigin I., Voss, R. (2009), *Handling customer complaints effectively*, Managing Service Quality, vol. 19, nr. 6.

⁹Liu, R.R., McClure, P. (2001), *Recognizing cross-cultural differences in consumer complaint behaviour and intentions : an empirical examination*, Journal of Consumer Marketing, vol. 18, nr.1.

The complaining behaviour may be also influenced by the consumers' degree of politeness. People are characterized by a civility level which, in some cases, by their desire in not insulting their peers, may prevent the display of the complaining behaviour. Politeness can be seen through two different aspects: positive politeness and negative politeness¹⁰. Positive politeness occurs when people truly appreciate and feel solidarity towards others. Negative politeness concerns formalities, confinements and the desire to maintain appearances.

The relationship between complaining behaviour and customer satisfaction

Between a company's profitability and a customer's satisfaction lies a close and directly proportionate relation. With content customers, the company's reputation and profitability will increase.

Generally, firms must turn their attention to maintaining the consumer's satisfaction, both for profitability reasons, as for cost-related reasons. Attracting a new customer can cost five times more than keeping an old one.

Satisfaction may be seen as the result which derives from an activity of consumption of a good or service, some experts considering it as a real process¹¹. Satisfaction can be interpreted as a sense of accomplishment, once a need has been covered. As pressing the need is, the greater the satisfaction will be after its fulfilment.

Researches have revealed that satisfaction is differently interpreted by any person. Some perceive it as an emotion, others as a phase of evaluation of what they received after the consumption (if it amounts to expected standards)¹².

Regarding the link between satisfaction and complaining behaviour, customer's satisfaction level is one of the determinants of such conduct. Even if the original situation is an unpleasant one, that prompted the client to engage in making a complaint, he may ultimately obtain a settlement of the issue and will, implicitly, be satisfied with his complaint's positive consequences.

Dissatisfied clients adjust their negative feelings by means of the complaining behaviour. They are even more motivated, when sensing that this gives them a kind of emotional relief, if they do not see the issue which triggered the dissatisfaction as still pressing.

Most of the times, the employees' attitude, especially of those that deal directly with complaints, determine customers' perception towards the quality of a company. If coldly or indifferently treated, it is likely that those customers take their complaints elsewhere, to other potential clients or even to the authorities.

Consumers who are encouraged to express their points of view, even complaints, and receive a positive feedback from that company, are more likely to buy again from that firm, due to the appreciative feeling.

A few tips for companies

Many multinational companies have understood the meaning of maintaining customers' satisfaction, and try, whenever possible, to keep a good relationship with them.

The key to any small or large business is the correct and effective implementation of relationship marketing principles, in order to build a sustainable relationship with its customers. By developing appropriate marketing strategies, an increase in customers' satisfaction will be obtained.

¹⁰ Lerman, D. (2006), *Consumer politeness and complaining behaviour*, Journal of Services Marketing, vol. 20, nr. 2, p. 93.

¹¹ Parker, C., Mathews, P.B. (2001), *Customer satisfaction: contrasting academic and consumers' interpretations*, Marketing Intelligence&Planning, vol. 19, nr. 1, p.38.

¹² Idem, p.43.

All entrepreneurs should provide, within their organization, a more effective customer dissatisfaction post-purchase management, as in designing and implementing management strategies for complaints.

Also, customers' education regarding the operational mechanism for the complaining process is very important. One can send messages through different media, to encourage clients in expressing any dissatisfaction towards the company.

Sometimes, the best way for preventing problems and maintaining a good relationship with the clients, is after-sales service. Telephones or letters sent after a purchase can make customers feel valued, and the fact that sometimes their opinion is required can lead to a positive feedback, even when faced to the need for a complaint. Customers coming directly to the seller will partially eliminate the risk of negative advertising or calling in other undesirable ways.

However, a correlation should be made between this feedback request from customers, and the solutions offered by the company, in case of complaints. If the company itself does not provide the expected customer support, the latter may feel cheated, so the consequences will not be positive for the firm.

Companies that develop a reputation based on seriousness with which they treat their customers and the effectiveness in redressing unpleasant issues, will surely attract a loyal clientele.

It should also ensure that those customers, whom they want loyal, perceive a high degree of success, regarding the complaining conduct.

An important role is played by employees in direct contact with the clients and their grievances. Often, on them and their attitude depends the smooth solution. Therefore, employees should be well prepared to deal with these situations and to treat it with seriousness and responsibility. It is harder to relate to an impatient person, but if employees participate to a specialized course, and realize the importance of their role, can adjust the predicament to favour the company.

More delicate are situations where consumers are rather restrained regarding the complaining behaviour, so they feel intimidated or simply are not familiar to such situations. The company should carefully design its message to the customers, emphasizing their opinion or advice rather than the complaining process.

Maintaining a good relationship with current customers and a positive image for potential ones, represent successful factors in increasing the profitability of any organization. Attention and seriousness regarding all problems which might arise should be a motto for all companies in search of long term prosperity.

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Aknowledgements

Financing by the project POSDRU/88/1.5/S/47646