COMPLAINT COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON CUSTOMER JUSTICE EXPECTATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Marketing researchers and managers have recognized the importance of soliciting and resolving customer complaint and developed a good knowledge base about customer complaint.   Though their studies suggest that effective communication plays an important role in service recovery, researches focused on communication, especially communication media have been relatively narrow.   As a result, a few questions remain unanswered.   For example, do customers prefer certain complaint media to others? What factors would influence customer media choices? How different media choices lead to different resolution expectations? In recent years, firms are investing significant resources to expand complaint media, and answering those questions will help firms incorporate media factors to a more effective handling strategy.   This study seeks to bridge the gap between communication researches focused on media selection and service complaint researches focused on customer recovery expectations by exploring the determinants and outcomes of media choices.   We attempt to find out 1) whether customers prefer rich media to lean media for service complaint; 2) whether past experience influence future selection of specific media; 3) whether the type of media affects customer expectations.

Complaint researches demonstrate that customer perception of justice significantly affect customers' ultimate satisfaction (Tax et al 1998; Speaks and MeColl-Kennedy 2001).   Three dimensions of justice have been identified: distributive justice, which focuses on the perceived fairness of outcome; procedure justice, which concerns the procedure used to reach the outcomes of an exchange; and interactional justice, which addresses the way customers are treated through the process (Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999).   On the other hand, media richness theory describes communication media as possessing a set of objective characteristics that determine each media's capability to carry rich information (Daft and lengel 1984). Rice (1992) ranks media based on the range of information they can carry: face-to-face as the richest media, followed by telephone as the semi-rich media, and email and postal mail as the lean media.

The key finding of the study is that rich media (face-to-face) is the most-frequently used complaint media, especially when customers experience process failure and high magnitude failure.   Interestingly, customers perceive rich media as the best media choice regardless of dissatisfaction with rich media in the past. The finding points to the importance of having specific customer representatives to handle face-to-face complaints.   Though new technologies provide firm with options to handle complaints in a timely manner, firms should keep investing on face-to-face compliant service, and make it easily accessible to customers.   Furthermore, rich media results in higher expectation of distributive justice. Firms need to train front-desk employees who handle face-to-face complaints with comprehensive compensation knowledge, and provide them guidelines to compensate dissatisfied customers. The proper use of discount or rebate may help meet complainants' expectations. Additionally, the results indicate that postal mail is the least-frequently used media, and email may substitute postal mail in the future.   Another encouraging finding of the study suggests that past satisfaction with the lean media will have a positive effect on future lean media use.   Purdy and Nye (2000) argue that one must go through a learning process prior to becoming proficient on computer mediated channels. When firms have limited resource in providing optimum media or attempt to use email as a new complaint media, they should provide some forms of communication training to support email users. Most importantly, firms should better create satisfactory recovery experience for complainants who use email.   As a result, customers will gradually develop new insights and experiences toward email, and firms can then expand the communication possibilities of media.