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The disloyalty ladder — Two rungs further down

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Abstract

This paper reviews the Loyalty Ladder and puts forward two additional negative categories — Hostile and Enemy — that the author believes should be added to that model for the purposes of marketing planning, so as to consciously consider and manage negative market attitudes. Evidence for the cost and effect of Hostile activity is put forward from work on Net Promoter® Score. Anecdotal evidence is provided for the existence of Enemy; however, the latter category is less well defined, and its effects on organizations are equally hard to classify. It is not altogether clear whether Enemies lead the charge — or merely piggyback on the periodic waves of public outrage at particular business practices that appear to be potentiated by the use of the internet and social networking sites. The rationale for adding at least one of these categories to the Loyalty Ladder is to ensure that the effect of negative customer perceptions is factored into business and marketing plans at the formulation stage, rather than viewed as an unforeseen after-effect, to be dealt with separately from other aspects of the business.

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Background — The Loyalty Ladder

The Loyalty Ladder is one of the first pieces of marketing wisdom that students of the subject find themselves presented with. Its simplicity may sometimes deceive, as it is in fact the jumping-off point for a significant amount of further insight. It is the beginning of segmentation — it is at the root of the fundamental tenet of customer relationship marketing — that in the long run, it is far more effective to look after and grow existing business than always to be on the lookout for new.

The Loyalty Ladder consists of five stages — or rungs, as it is frequently illustrated, quite literally, as a ladder with five rungs. These are the following:

- Suspect
- Prospect
- Customer
- Client
- Advocate

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The stages are listed out here in order of increasing loyalty — with Suspect being the least loyal and Advocate the most. ‘Loyal’ in this sense has more or less its everyday usage, and reflects the level of attachment that an individual has to an organization, product or service.

Precise definitions of each step vary.

However, one set of definitions¹ is as shown below:

Suspect	Anyone who reads or hears an ad, looks at a brochure or encounters some other type of promotion is a Suspect
Prospect	Someone who pays attention to your promotion
Customers	Those who buy your product or service
Client	A customer who buys a second time
Advocate	A customer who provides unpaid promotion for the products or services of a business

Some marketers appear to use a somewhat truncated version of the ladder, with only four categories. This they manage by combining either the first two or the last two. This does not breach the underlying principle of Loyalty as a continuum from least to most loyal, which includes as implied gospel the idea that marketers ought to manage their customers in some way according to the level of loyalty they display.

The literature is also highly attuned to statements that tend to maximize the value of piggybacking on the back of Loyalty-based approaches. Therefore,

- it takes a least three times as much money to attract a new customer via traditional forms of advertising as to re-attract a repeat customer;
- it takes at least 30 times as much marketing money to attract a new customer via traditional forms of advertising as to have a satisfied customer find new customers for you; and
- most business owners spend less than 5 per cent of their marketing dollars on their customers and spend 95 per cent of their marketing dollars trying to find new customers.

The Loyalty Ladder — Additional considerations

The definitions provided for Loyalty are all behavioural descriptions, and focus on the level of interaction an individual has with an organization. It is important to bear this in mind, as debate on this subject does sometimes shift towards considering loyalty not so much as behavioural syndrome as psychological trait: a description of the motivational levels of the individual concerned.

This is particularly relevant to Loyalty Schemes, insofar as much literature² has highlighted the opposite of loyalty — promiscuity — also in behavioural terms. Thus, promiscuity is a tendency for customers to switch brands frequently or rapidly in the face of the multitude of different promotional messages to which they are exposed on a daily basis.

Too much marketing spend is focused on acquisition

The consequence of this behavioural perspective on Loyalty/promiscuity is a set of very clear marketing strategies: if someone is not using a product much, then it is worth incentivizing product usage to increase usage levels and to habituate them to those higher levels.

If they are already at high usage levels, then reward schemes should be put in place to safeguard their business — also, early warning systems that will alert the marketing team to individuals who are showing signs of dissatisfaction and imminent defection.

Further, in terms of recruiting new customers, this understanding of the Loyalty mechanism would lead companies to recruit — or attempt to recruit — new customers from those currently least attached to competitors.

The difficulty with this approach — and it is an issue that was identified by John Ozimek during work on a cosmetics client in 1992 — is that the model of customer motivation that underpins it may, simply, be wrong. In work on a Loyalty campaign for a company that manufactured hair care products, the author built a customer database and then allocated individuals to segments on the basis of their current Loyalty level (defined in terms of which products had been used over a set period of time) and level of usage.

The aim was to create a nine-cell grid, defined by Usage (High, Medium, Low) and Loyalty Level (High, Medium, Low). This was later sub-divided by main supplier (own company vs. competitor), and the marketing strategies that were applied to each cell were very much in line with a view that the individual presence in each of these cells was simply a function of behaviour.

While it was not possible to challenge this directly at the time, early analysis of the project suggested a slightly different model. This was that to some extent, Loyalty and Promiscuity were not just descriptors of behaviour, but customer traits. Some customers were more loyal than others; such people would probably form the bedrock of whatever community they joined, whether it was their local choral society, church group or Rotary Club. Others appeared to be promiscuous by nature: they flitted from supplier to supplier irrespective of what steps were taken to hold onto them.

This conjecture is beyond the scope of this paper. It also has little effect on the top-line conclusions to be drawn. However, it is a suitable topic for future study, since the consequence of this aspect of customer loyalty is quite significant when it comes to developing strategies.

If it is the case that Loyalty is a behaviour that can be built up over time, then organizations need to take on customers with indifferent levels of Loyalty and foster relationships with them. If, on the other hand, some people are naturally loyal and some are naturally promiscuous, then there is a strong case for targeting a competitor's most loyal customers (or clients): the effort required to convert them is far greater than that required to convert a customer who exhibits a low level of loyalty; however, once converted, they are likely to be far more loyal and far less likely to be subject to short-term defections than those converted (more easily) from the ranks of the promiscuous.

**Loyalty may be an
internal trait — not
a behaviour**

None of the above invalidates the Loyalty Ladder; in fact, by providing new ways to look at how it functions, and by dividing those aspects of it that are mere descriptions of behaviour from those that are about motivation, it is possible for marketers to approach the embedding of customers in a far more rounded way.

Insofar as loyalty is a statement about behaviour, loyal behaviours are to be encouraged and disloyal behaviours discouraged. Where it is a question of individual personality and motivation, an organization should seek to maximize its share of the loyal customers and minimize its uptake among the promiscuous (particularly where initial costs to serve are high). In other words, in a behavioural universe, companies should seek to modify behaviour in the most opportune way possible: in a world where loyalty is more a personal trait, marketing focus should be more on recruiting the right set of people.

None of this invalidates the thesis, set out below, that organizations need now to recognize the existence of additional rungs on the Loyalty Ladder.

Existence of additional categories

There is strong support, both from anecdotes and from marketing literature, for the recognition of additional categories of individuals that ought to be added to the Loyalty Ladder, both as a fuller description of a company's customer base and as a means of developing marketing strategy. In one sense, this is a 'no-brainer': almost every marketing manager that has ever existed is aware that there are individuals outside of the simple five-step categorization set up by the Loyalty Ladder.

There are ex-customers who, from a recruitment perspective, form a group quite distinct from suspects or prospects: they are no longer customers, but since they have experience of the product or service on offer, they may be an easier — or harder — group to sell to depending on why they ceased to be customers.

Then there are those whose attitude towards their supplier is to some degree not positive. They are customers, or in some cases non-customers, and their attitude towards your organization has not merely ceased to be positive — it has become to some degree actively hostile.

Hostility can be shown to be intimately interconnected³ to Customer Satisfaction Levels, which in turn relate to complaints and the way in which complaints are resolved.

Jones and Sasser (1995)^{4,5} put forward a model for Retailers that identifies the sad truth that not all customers are customers by choice. Some are 'mercenaries', taking whatever deal they can get, and moving on whenever a better deal becomes available elsewhere: some are 'hostages', trapped in a relationship they do not particularly want, and yet more are (potential) 'terrorists' — trapped for the time being — but likely to do immense damage to your company image the moment they are able to find a new supplier.

In fact, they probably do not need to change suppliers in order to be spreading negative comments about current suppliers. After all, a

Some influential individuals are not customers

Not all customers are yours by choice

customer–supplier relationship is usually not governed by considerations of confidentiality in quite the same way as, say, an employer–staff relationship.

Given the above, it makes sense to support the addition to the Loyalty Ladder of at least one additional category: Hostile. An individual who falls into this category is both dissatisfied with an organization's products or services and prepared to spread that dissatisfaction by word of mouth (WOM) among friends and colleagues.

Not only that, but the spread of social networking sites and applications has provided a far wider and far more impactful range of tools to any ordinary member of the public who wishes to express public discontent with a company or its products.

It is further argued here that they are the antithesis not of the Advocate rung on the ladder, but of the Client. The latter is an individual who is sufficiently favourable towards your products and services that they are prepared to make additional use of them, by buying on more than one occasion.

Against this, an individual characterized as Hostile is making as little use of your goods as possible, and may well be informing others of their dissatisfaction. However, we would not, on those grounds alone, place them as opposite to the Advocate. This position is reserved for one further category that we shall identify as an Enemy.

An individual falling into the latter category has moved so far beyond ordinary dissatisfaction that they are now taking active steps to undermine the profitability of your organization. They may be talking with lawyers or the press; they may be setting up hostile websites. They may be turning up at shareholders' meetings in order to put forward (political) arguments or simply to disrupt.

Hostile customers are dangerous

Enemies are rare — but their influence may be out of all proportion to their number. A number of studies suggest that Hostile individuals will talk about their unfavourable experiences with an organization to between 10 and 20 other people. This is a number to bear in mind when considering how seriously to take complaints. Again, marketing texts suggest that for every complaint registered, some half a dozen or more are not registered, as individuals either do not have the time or do not see the point.

If the majority of complainants are Hostile, then every complaint represents a reservoir of between 60 and 200 individuals who are receiving unfavourable views of your organization.

Enemies can seriously damage your bottom line

Enemies are far less predictable, perhaps worthy of an entire paper to themselves; because they are rare and because they are maverick individuals, it is not entirely clear what motivates, or what is likely to distinguish the truly effective Enemy from the crank. It seems likely that many start from the basis of some unaddressed frustration with an organization; they then pass to making threats ('I'll talk to the press' or 'You'll be hearing from my lawyers').

No formal data exist to provide a numeric basis for the number of would-be enemies, but one author — John Ozimek — has direct

Not all unhappy customers follow through on their complaints

experience of individuals as they move on to the next stage. As a writer on current affairs, John Ozimek is frequently contacted by individuals with complaints that are more or less well founded about the workings of some organization's sales mechanisms.

The vast majority of these complaints turn out either to be not well founded (a single call to a Press Office is sufficient to elicit information that will disprove the complaint being made) or where they have some foundation, the individual concerned does not have the stamina to carry through with whatever threats they have made.

In a very small proportion of cases, the individual continues, and the result can then be a major headache for the organization for years thereafter.

If we are to recognize these two additional categories, they are essentially subterranean, belonging at the foot of the ladder before the rungs emerge into daylight. Thus:

- Enemy
- Hostile
- Suspect
- Prospect
- Customer
- Client
- Advocate

There are clearly arguments that could be made to the effect that this spectrum is no longer strictly linear or based on a single criterion. Many of those who are deemed to be 'Hostile' may also be Customers; in principle, however, the same might be said of Advocates. Individuals who are not in a position currently to buy the products offered by a particular company might nonetheless be strong advocates of them.

The Loyalty Ladder does already intermingle at least two different criteria. These are the degree to which an individual is a customer of an organization and the degree to which they are loyal to it or prepared to act as an ambassador or promoter for it.

The re-writing of the Ladder set out above focuses primarily on the second of these criteria, acknowledging in the process that customer status may be an issue.

Detractors: Net Promoter[®] techniques provide support and quantification

Net Promoter[®] is a discipline co-developed by Satmetrix⁶ and Fred Reichheld that provides companies with a proven approach for measuring and improving customer loyalty. The Net Promoter[®] Score (NPS) compares the number of 'Promoters' (those who are highly likely to recommend a company and/or its products) to the number of 'Detractors' (those who are unlikely to recommend a company and/or products) within an organization's customer universe. This results in a single metric that serves as an indicator of customer loyalty and long-term growth.⁷

Net Promoter Score links to financial success

Net Promoter® has proven popular over the last few years, gaining widespread industry adoption with companies such as Apple, General Electric, Charles Schwab, Intuit and other world-class firms. According to Forrester Chairman and CEO George F. Colony, 'Net Promoter® is becoming a driving force within organizations'.⁸

The link between Net Promoter® and financial success remains a topic of active debate within the marketing arena, with some individuals openly dismissive of its value as a predictor of business success. Professor Robert Shaw, Visiting Professor of Marketing Metrics at Cass Business School, describes it as 'a lag indicator, whose cause-and-effect pedigree is poor'.⁹

Satmetrix counter by pointing to case studies — including one for Virgin Media — in which NPS has been used as a lead indicator, and has been instrumental in helping that company remove the sources of churn by focusing its improvement resources on the most important touchpoint as directed by the customer feedback.

Satmetrix has further sponsored a series of independent research projects that are designed to better understand the relationship between Net Promoter® and financial outcomes.

A series of white papers have recently been released that examine the link between customer loyalty and specific customer behaviours. These cover the areas of personal computing, credit cards and the wireless industry.¹⁰⁻¹²

For each study, a similar outline methodology was applied. That is, the Net Promoter® methodology was used to identify and segment respondents into Promoter and Detractor categories based on their likelihood to recommend. The papers then set out to quantify the worth of Promoters and Detractors alike by isolating the contribution of buyer and referral economics to total customer worth.

Using self-reported data, Satmetrix calculated the buyer economics of Promoters and Detractors based on their average annual spend amounts. As shown in Figure 1, the first hypothesis was that Promoters would tend to spend more, whereas Detractors would tend to spend less relative to the average customer. While this may not be universally true — the nature of the business and pricing structure may constrain incremental purchasing differences in some businesses — we would expect a difference where customers are freer to express their loyalty with their wallet.

It was also hypothesized that the total customer worth of Promoters would be augmented by new business generated through their positive referral behaviours — an indirect, but nonetheless real, impact of strong customer loyalty. Conversely, it was expected that the total worth of Detractors would drop due to lost opportunity costs resulting from their negative referral behaviours.

To estimate the *referral economics* of Promoters, the percentage of Promoters who had made a positive referral in the past 12 months was first multiplied by the average number of positive referrals issued by Promoters. This product was then multiplied by an overall conversion rate to arrive at the number of customers generated per Promoter.¹³

Figure 1: Comparing total customer worth for Promoters and Detractors, Satmetrix Presentation, June 2009.

Detractors (hostile) can be a serious drag on business

Once an estimate of the number of customers acquired per Promoter had been obtained, this was multiplied by the average spend across all customers to arrive at the dollar impact of positive referrals.

There were two consistent and important results from this exercise.

First, there are interesting differences (for instance, spend does not tend to differ by loyalty category for the wireless industry, in large part due to the business model for these providers). In general, however, there is a similar pattern across all the industries studied: Promoters are the positive growth engines for companies in each industry; Detractors are typically a drag on the business (even without accounting for cost to acquire and cost to serve).

Secondly, it appears to be difficult to get a sense of true customer worth without accounting for the impact of WOM behaviours, of the kind studied in this exercise — and this effect overlaps directly with the Loyalty Ladder concept outlined above. This effect is highlighted in Figure 1, which shows that while the difference in customer worth between Promoters and Detractors for wireless providers is negligible if you look only at top-line revenue, it becomes quite dramatic once WOM impact is factored in.

A further significant outtake from this study is demonstrated in Figure 2.

This further demonstrates a direct link between business success and the number of Detractors that an organization has to deal with.

In the context of the discussion within this paper, a Detractor is a useful surrogate for the Hostile category already identified in the proposed revision of the Loyalty Ladder. Every Detractor is a critic to some degree, and the significance of the work carried out by Satmetrix is that it puts a figure, within several industries, on the cost to an organization of an average Detractor — or Hostile.

It turns out that in many cases this figure is quite significant: moreover, in terms of overall business success, a high level of Hostile customers is also a major drag on the bottom line.

Figure 2: Linking promoter and detractor behaviours to financial growth, Satmetrix Client Data, 3-year span.

Enemies: We're all Spartacus now

As already argued, the question of what turns an ordinary individual into a successful 'enemy' of a large corporation is a subject worthy of several studies in its own right.

There may, too, be many instances where it is not the influence of one individual that is responsible for a corporate disaster, so much as the right campaign just happening to catch the corporate mood at the right time.

Thus, Facebook and other social networking sites have been instrumental in a number of corporate climbdowns over the last few years.

In August 2007, HSBC was forced to make a U-turn after 6,000 students used Facebook to protest against plans to scrap interest-free student overdrafts. HSBC decided to freeze interest on 2007 graduate overdrafts up to £1,500, with future policy subject to review. Recent graduates who were subject to additional interest charges in August were eligible for a refund.¹⁴

It helps to have media backing, or to be media savvy. In October 2008, the BBC was forced into an embarrassing climbdown after two of its presenters — Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand — had publicly insulted entertainer Andrew Sachs and his granddaughter.¹⁵ In this case, the issue was initially of little interest to the public in general, and appears to have been pushed up the agenda as a result of the incident being highlighted by the *Daily Mail*.

In the same month, the UK Government discovered to its cost the price of taking on a high-profile celebrity in a cause that struck a populist chord: Joanna Lumley took up the argument for Gurkhas to have a right to reside in the United Kingdom after serving in the British Army, and after being made to look very foolish, the government backed down.¹⁶

Two more recent incidents highlight the power of anonymous social networking. In October 2009, international corporation Trafigura

**Enemies can
make even large
organizations back
down**

sought, through their lawyers Carter-Ruck, to prevent the *Guardian* and other newspapers from publishing details of questions to be asked in the House of Commons about a report soon to be published on their business activities. The response from the social internet — Facebook, Twitter, e-petitions, etc — was instantaneous and overwhelming.

Carter-Ruck had just discovered first hand the ‘Streisand Effect’, defined by Wikipedia as ‘an Internet phenomenon where an attempt to censor or remove a piece of information backfires, causing the information to be publicized widely and to a greater extent than would have occurred if no censorship had been attempted’.

A similar public onslaught awaited Jan Moir, a columnist for the *Daily Mail*, who published an opinion piece following the death of Boyzone singer Stephen Gately that was widely perceived to be tactless and homophobic. Although Ms Moir described the scale of the public attacks upon her as evidence of ‘orchestrated’ action, the reverse is more likely to be true. When a news story catches the public imagination, it spreads across the internet like wildfire, and it is beyond the ability of any government or set of individuals to return the story to its box.

The purpose of these examples is to highlight first the enormous power that consumer pressure can have on organizations nowadays, and second to highlight the uncertain nature of where that pressure comes from.

It is clear that some campaigns are inspired by or even the work of a single individual — while others appear almost to snowball from nowhere. To what extent an individual’s influence is purely serendipitous — the luck of raising the right issue at the right time — is far more debatable.

It is not clear whether enemies lead — or follow

This in turn will tend to colour how important an organization believes looking out for Enemies is. If it is believed that Enemies are people who manage to stir events — to whip the public up into a frenzy of indignation against some unfair practice — and that without such individuals the public outcry would not follow, then it makes sense to take precautions.

If it is believed that the public are destined to become worked up over certain issues at certain times and that the issues that catch their attention depend as much on chance as anything else, there is little any organization can do about it. A bad customer management practice might persist for years with low-level complaining and very little negative outcome — and that same practice might suddenly be the focus of national indignation, and the organization in question would have little choice but to change its way of working very quickly.

Summary and conclusion

This paper has put forward the proposition that the Loyalty Ladder should possess not five steps, but seven — and the additional two might be considered as being to some degree subterranean, as they represent customer negativity towards an organization.

To a degree, this is an argument that is impossible to settle, since it is about how to describe and segment the customer population — and the number of ways that an organization can do that is countless.

However, there is some good evidence from work by Satmetrix on NPS that the effect of ‘Detractors’ — who are defined as customers with a negative perception of an organization — exert a definite downward pressure on company financial outcomes.

Therefore, it is sensible to relate this category to the development of business and marketing strategy.

There is also some debate about a category identified as ‘Enemies’: these are those individuals who are sufficiently upset with an organization that they turn their energies towards campaigning against that organization. While such a category undoubtedly exists, it is far harder to quantify how many there are or what their real effect is.

Again, it seems likely that some Enemies are highly effective when it comes to uniting public opinion and bringing about major and often costly changes in how corporations do business. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many such effects are almost ‘viral’ in nature — and therefore a serious question mark remains over how far Enemies act as instigators of events, and how far they are mere followers.

The purpose of this paper is not to put forward solutions for marketers. The entire issue of Hostile and Enemy customers sits fair and square within areas such as loyalty, satisfaction and complaint handling. Issues such as customer experience and process may also play a part.

Rather, this paper aims to make the case for a formal addition of at least one negative category to the Loyalty Ladder, in recognition that dealing with adverse customer opinion is not something that needs to be thought about after the event — but should form an integral part of marketing planning from the start.

By introducing this category into marketing planning, it is to be hoped that organizations will, at an early stage, begin to evaluate their processes and customer interfaces with a view to identifying likely sources of friction and cost — and identifying those areas where pre-emptive action would be useful.

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6. Satmetrix and the Satmetrix logo are registered trademarks of Satmetrix Systems, Inc. Net Promoter, Net Promoter Score and NPS are trademarks of Satmetrix Systems, Inc., Bain & Company, Inc., and Fred Reicheld.

**It is time to review
the Loyalty Ladder**

7. The Net Promoter[®] metric is based on one simple question: 'Would you recommend us to a friend or colleague?' The scale employed is an 11-point (0–10) likelihood scale. To calculate the Net Promoter[®] Score, take the percentage of customers who are Promoters (defined as scores of 9 or 10) and subtract the percentage who are Detractors (defined as scores of 0 through 6).
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