Complaint letters and commitment theory: An empirical approach in mail-order selling

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Abstract A consumer's dissatisfaction can be exhibited by complaint behaviour (CB) which has various means of expression. This behaviour is also motivated by different factors. Consumer commitment to a close trade relationship with the retailer seems to play a role in its genesis. This survey, conducted from a mail-order selling firm's database, tends to verify this hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

Although database marketing has been operational for a long time in the domain of mail-order selling, it is a particularly relevant research field in consumer behaviour. All relationship events between the firm and its customers have to be studied in order to carry out more efficient customer portfolio management, especially through customer loyalty and retention policies.

Complaint behaviour (CB), when displayed, is valuable information for the firm. It offers practitioners the last opportunity to retain their customers if they are able to take care of and to manage this behaviour. First, this paper provides a definition of CB through a

literature review, then it highlights a taxonomy and a typology of this behaviour. The third part attempts to outline its antecedents and determinants in order to draw out further the motivations behind this behaviour. Commitment theory is examined to gain a better insight into CB. Do complainers show a particular profile? Is their commitment in the trade relationship different from that of uncomplaining customers who are similarly dissatisfied? Can the expression of their dissatisfaction through complaint mail be modelled or forecast from a database? This study, using a well-known French mail-order firm's database, attempts to answer, at least partially, some of these questions.

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DEFINITION, CLASSIFICATION AND TYPOLOGY OF COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR

Definition

Complaint behaviour is generally, but not exclusively, related to the period after purchase, following a given consumption experience, where the consumer faces a failure producing high dissatisfaction which can be neither psychologically accepted nor quickly forgotten.^{1,2} Jacoby and Jaccard define it as 'an action taken by an individual which involves communicating something negative regarding a product (or service), to either the firm manufacturing or marketing that product (or service), or to a third-party'. Singh³ considers that this behaviour is induced by sentimental or emotional reactions and suggests a two-stage response.⁴ The first level is behavioural and expresses the consumer's dissatisfaction, not only towards the seller but also towards a third party, friends or relatives. The other level, non-behavioural, produces no action, for example when the source of dissatisfaction has been forgotten or when an individual has no desire to act.⁵

Because consumers can exhibit various responses, it is of interest to differentiate between a taxonomy of responses and a typology of complainers.

A taxonomy of responses to dissatisfaction

Within the framework of a taxonomy of responses to dissatisfaction, Day and Landon distinguish public and private actions according to the nature and the importance of the product generating dissatisfaction.⁶ Day suggests that consumers complain (or do not complain) in order to achieve specific objectives: for instance, redress seeking, complaining for reasons other than

seeking repair or to boycott the product or the firm.⁷

Hirschman outlines three types of response: *exit*, an active and destructive response; *voice*, an active and constructive response that involves the attempt to change the practices, policies and outputs of the organisation from which one buys; and *loyalty* as a passive and constructive response without implying that the consumers have a positive attitude towards the seller, loyalty being here only of a behavioural nature.⁸ Singh highlights a three-dimensional structure of responses: *voice* towards the seller, the retailer or the supplier; *private* response for friends or relatives; response towards a *third party* not involved in the transaction, eg Office of Consumer Affairs, press or legal actions.⁹

A typology of complainers

Several typologies have been proposed in the literature. Masson and Himes describe three groups of customers: those who are upset and take no action, those who are upset and take some action and those who are not upset.¹⁰ Pfaff and Blivice distinguish between activists and non-activists.¹¹ Shuptrine and Wenglorz,¹² and later Bearden and Teel,¹³ separate complainers from non-complainers. Other scholars highlight more groups. Singh, for example, splits the passives (14 per cent of his sample) who take no action, the voicers (37 per cent) who will complain to the seller, the angry consumers (21 per cent) who will transmit negative word-of-mouth to friends or to relatives and will stop patronising the retailer, and the activists (28 per cent) who will complain to third parties.¹⁴ Weiser also outlines four customer segments, as a function of the willingness to complain and how easy it is to access the complaints office.¹⁵ The present authors believe that it is through

this willingness to complain that the concept of commitment is encountered. It could be argued that the more the customer feels involved in the trade relationship, the more they tend to complain.

A last approach would be to class the different complaint media, but it is simplistic to think that in mail-order business, only phoning or writing can be used to communicate dissatisfaction to the seller.

Antecedents and determinants of complaint behaviour

Although perceived dissatisfaction stands as a necessary antecedent for CB, it seems that it is not a sufficient condition for complaining to occur.¹⁶

Obviously, there is a strong relation between dissatisfaction intensity and its response styles,^{17–21} although it seems to be non-linear.²² The more dissatisfied the consumer, the more likely they are to exit or to voice their complaint, and the more loyalty decreases. There are, however, some threshold effects. When dissatisfaction exceeds a given level, consumers tend to exit and to practise negative word of mouth. This non-linear relationship can be supported by a combination of effort and involvement arguments. When the perceived dissatisfaction is weak, individuals are not motivated to expend a great deal of effort on CB responses. In the case of medium dissatisfaction level, people could be only slightly involved in the complaint process and seek redress. At this stage, the involvement is not high enough to justify investing additional effort in other actions. When, however, the perceived dissatisfaction increases, the commitment to complain is higher, which, in turn, justifies other responses, such as exit and negative word of mouth or appeal to a third party.

Voice actions may be regarded as a function of preference, as is the availability of purchase alternatives.²³ When the alternatives are restricted, a voice response will be more relevant. Can the number of perceived CB alternatives then be a function of the level of commitment in the consumer–supplier relationship? Does a consumer have a clear vision of these alternative behaviours? If a consumer's preference for voice action seems to be a function of the expected value of the complaint outcome minus the associated costs, the frequency of buyer–seller interactions (purchase frequency) is important in the choice of response style.

A compensatory mode is used if dissatisfaction happens incidentally in the course of a long relationship. Thus Andreasen and Best noted that frequently-purchased goods seem to be a source of higher dissatisfaction than rarely bought products.²⁴ Nevertheless, CB is also related to some transaction characteristics, like perceived risk and degree of dependence on the retailer or on the product.²⁵

Some sociocultural variables are also linked to CB, for example educational level^{26–29} or the volume of information that the consumer is able to collect.³⁰ Income does not seem to be a discriminatory variable,^{31,32} but complainants are mostly professionals and are younger.^{33,34} These sociodemographic variables, however, do not remain very predictive. Purely individual factors can influence the type of response,³⁵ for example:

- strength of loyalty to the brand, product or supplier
- the person's ability to appraise the quality of the product
- educational level and individual taste
- the individual's ability to detect differences in quality (through past

- experience and through the level of acquired information)
- perception of the cost/profit ratio resulting in various possible actions
- the type of purchase and the nature of dissatisfaction
- the importance of consumerist organisations
- the individual's personality, particularly his/her degree of aggressiveness.^{36,37}

On the other hand, the profit of a complaint is a function of its outcome minus its costs.³⁸ Transaction costs theory refers to the contract inherent in any trade relationship. Transactions involve uncertainty and are subject to contracts. Perceived dissatisfaction is conceived as realised risk, eg regret experienced by consumers after making a purchase.³⁹ As a general rule, most dissatisfied customers do not engage in any open complaint. According to Gronhaug and Gilly this is due to the cost of such a step, which generates uncertainty as an outcome in itself.⁴⁰ The consumer perceives the profit of their action as being as low as its associated costs. The search for a new product or a new supplier, however, generates other costs, and the dissatisfied consumer often refrains from any action at all.⁴¹

If the product price (or the total order price) is one of the factors most closely related to CB, the allocation of responsibility for the dissatisfaction is also a determining factor.⁴² This is why in mail order, complaints are frequently prompted by delivery delays or deferments — problems which involve the supplier directly. The adverse reaction will be all the more if the total amount of the order is paid before its delivery. So, the nature and the intensity of a dissatisfied consumer's reaction depend on the perceived gravity of the problem and how much responsibility for it the consumer attributes to the firm.⁴³

Consumers who perceive the cause of their dissatisfaction as ongoing (ie the problem might be repeated in the future) or controllable (the individual thinks that the supplier could have prevented the trouble) are generally more likely to stop buying the product or drop the company, and engage in negative word of mouth, than consumers who think the problem is unlikely to be repeated or that, in this situation, the supplier could not do anything else to prevent it.

To summarise this literature review, four dominant factors seem to be involved in CB following dissatisfaction:

- the possibility of alternative choices
- the hoped or expected utility of the complaint compared with the perceived costs
- the degree of proximity (commitment) in the relationship with the product or the provider
- individual factors, which are mainly psychological in character.

CONTRIBUTION OF COMMITMENT THEORY TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF CB

However the CB is characterised, it seems that it is strongly dependent on the nature of the relationship between the customer and the supplier. These relational patterns are obviously polymorphic, and are anchored in the length of the trade relationship.

Beyond description of the form or duration of the relationship, however, it is essential to investigate the psychocognitive implications of the relationship for the consumer. In this respect the notion of commitment is particularly interesting. Commitment theory was initially used to describe the process which leads an individual to make a decision, more particularly a purchase decision. In terms of sales techniques, it is

a question of leading the individual to act and to engage in the trade relationship. This facilitates order taking or product purchase. The commercial imperative then is to create a situation which facilitates the individual's commitment to the relationship, by leading them to make a decision or to do small acts, which draw them into the trade relationship. The conceptual foundations of commitment are well structured. Kiesler defines commitment as a gradual relation between the individual and their behavioural activity.⁴⁴ So, in any given situation, the more the individual acts, the more they are involved.

This primary definition should however be expanded. The behavioural activity, which usually leads an individual towards commitment is related to a feeling of freedom. Because the individual has a free choice the action following their decision leads to commitment. Besides, even if commitment is initially built on decisions or acts requiring little involvement on the individual's part, each act increases that commitment. Finally, commitment develops with time and the individual is constrained to protect the consistency of their acts or decisions over time.

How then to place CB within commitment theory? The main hypothesis raised in this paper is that CB is not an incidental behaviour in response to a contingent dissatisfaction. It is the consequence of the customer's commitment in a trade relationship. And a complaint is the consequence of a commitment bound to the purchase decision. This basic point requires an inventory of the various criteria which could convey the customer's commitment in a trade relationship.

As a first approach, it can be supposed that a new customer is less disposed to complain. They are not yet sufficiently engaged in the relationship and,

therefore, any dissatisfaction caused by an incident is unlikely to be expressed. The new dissatisfied customer prefers to classify the supplier in a cognitive manner as unable to fulfil their expectations and the customer does not carry on with the trade relationship. The situation is very different for a loyal⁴⁵ customer. When an incident occurs which causes dissatisfaction the customer perceives it as unacceptable compared with their commitment and feels the growing necessity to express their dissatisfaction publicly (in the sense of Day and Landon⁴⁶). The complaint is, then, an attempt on the customer's part, to change an unsatisfactory situation.^{47,48}

The customer's commitment, which is somehow anchored in the length of the relationship, has to be modulated somehow. So, in addition to loyalty in its classic sense, the cumulated turnover, the number of products bought or even the number of orders, can be factors which structure commitment and, according to the hypothesis, positively contribute to the occurrence of CB.⁴⁹ From this perspective, the complaint letter is a means of highlighting to the supplier their lack of recognition of the customer's commitment in the trade relationship.

The second criterion is linked to the episode that caused the dissatisfaction and concerns the degree of importance attached to the purchase.⁵⁰ First, the purchase can be considered important if the amount of the order is high — the higher the amount the more likely a dissatisfied customer is to protest. Secondly, the fewer items there are in an order the greater the relative importance of the product responsible for dissatisfaction — the customer is prompted to protest if they cannot minimise their dissatisfaction by focusing on other products in the order.

The final criterion which can explain

Figure 1 Theoretical model

CB relates to the degree of proximity that the customer maintains with the supplier.⁵¹ A customer who has already phoned the firm should be more likely to complain by mail than a customer who has not. This is the idea of a progression process in CB.^{52,53}

The various hypotheses stated in this paper make the assumption that a letter of complaint following a delayed delivery is a consequence of the customer's commitment to the trade relationship. This commitment is hypothesised to have two components: commitment associated with the length of the relationship (its anteriority), and commitment linked to the nature of the dissatisfaction episode itself. Finally, CB is hypothesised to be progressive, eg a complaint by phone would precede a letter of complaint (Figure 1).

RESEARCH METHODS

Data collection and sampling

The empirical study used the database of a mail-order firm. The survey period was spread out over three months and only

written complaints were taken into account. At first, all individuals who had written a complaint over the reference period were considered. Then, however, it was necessary to consider in more detail the nature of the complaint, for instance what were the motives for a complaint (delayed delivery, discount incentives, competitions and speed of billing). For sampling reasons, only data relating to individuals who protested about delayed delivery and who asked for a refund were analysed. (This allowed for the exclusion of individuals who had no specific CB objective and was a situation where the complaint could cause immediate harm to the firm.) The sample was of 67 individuals who were qualified through commercial information concerning the order and their customer history. A control sample of 71 individuals who suffered a delayed delivery but did not complain was randomly selected from the customer database.

Variables and test design

Each customer was coded as having sent or not having sent a written complaint.

Table 1: Complaint behaviour factors

Model		–2LL	χ^2	df	Sig (p)	
Overall fit		164.33	26.86	7	0.0004	
Variables	B	Stand. error	Wald	df	Sig (p)	partial correlation
Number of products in incriminated order	–0.859	0.337	6.51	1	0.010	–0.15
Amount of the incriminated order	0.004	0.0013	10.09	1	0.001	0.21
Complaint by phoning	–0.069	0.524	0.02	1	0.895	0.00
Loyalty level	–0.255	0.357	0.51	1	0.475	0.00
Cumulated turnover on five seasons	0.000	0.0005	0.78	1	0.375	0.00
Number of order on five seasons	0.362	0.265	1.86	1	0.172	0.00
Number of products bought on five seasons	–0.052	0.144	0.13	1	0.721	0.00
Constant	0.403	0.583	0.48	1	0.489	

This is the dichotomous qualitative dependent variable.

Variables which might reflect the level of commitment were considered, ie the amount of the order and the number of different products in the order.

With regards to commitment linked to the duration of the trade relationship, the greatest time span offered by the customer database (five seasons of six months each) was considered. For each season, the database identifies the number of orders, the number of different products bought and customer turnover. For each customer this information allowed computation of three variables characterising the trade relationship over five seasons, ie the cumulated number of orders, the number of products ordered and the cumulated turnover. A fourth variable characterised, roughly, the loyalty level by calculating over the five previous seasons the number of seasons in which the customer bought at least one product. All the variables related to commitment are metric.

Finally, with regard to the hypothesis of progressive CB, the variable which tracks the existence of a complaint by telephone before letter was computed as a dichotomous one. In order to test the various hypotheses, a logistic regression was used.

OUTCOMES

Two hypotheses were validated, the ones concerning the commitment related to the episode of dissatisfaction. The hypotheses concerning commitment based on anteriority of the trade relationship were not verified. This suggests that customers who are engaged in a long trade relationship (ie regular customers who have bought a lot of products in terms of quantity as well as in value) do not complain more in writing than new customers who have bought few products or products of little value (Table 1).

Furthermore, the fact of having already protested by telephone has no significant effect on an eventual written complaint. The hypothesis of a progressive process in the CB (Table 1) cannot, therefore, be validated.

One validated hypothesis concerns the commitment related to the episode of purchase. The size of a delayed order has an effect on the fact of complaining or of not complaining. It seems that the more the order costs, the higher is the probability of a complaint. The average amount spent by individuals who complained was approximately €68.14, while for those who did not complain it was around €45.90 (Figure 2).

There is also an observable effect of

Figure 2 Average amount of order and complaint behaviour

Figure 3 Average number of products ordered and complaint behaviour

the number of products ordered on CB. In other words, the fewer the items in an order, the higher the probability of observing CB following a delay in delivery. If the difference is weak (1.68 lines of order on average for complaining individuals, against 1.83 lines for

non-complainants), the model confirms a significant relation (Figure 3). These results consolidate the commitment–order relationship. So, the customer is more or less strongly engaged according to the characteristics of his current order and these lead to a

Table 2: The predictive quality of the model: the confusion matrix

Observed behaviour	Model prediction		Correct percentage
	No complaint	Complaint	
No complaint	54	17	76.1%
Complaint	22	45	67.2%
		Overall	71.7%

complaint according to the intensity of the initial commitment.

As two hypotheses of the initial model were verified the model can be deemed to be globally significant and it allows very accurate prediction of CB. Globally, the model does help to explain 71.7 per cent of the behaviours (Table 2). The results in Table 2 indicate, however, that the model allows a better explanation for non-complaining behaviour (76.1 per cent) than for written complaints (67.2 per cent). This suggests that other determinants of CB were not taken into account by the model.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study limit the contribution of commitment theory in the conceptualisation of CB. Generally speaking, it had been supposed that the complaint was the consequence of the intensity of the customer's commitment in the trade relationship, in the sense that the more an individual is engaged by their acts (ie previous and current orders), the more they will tend to require a recognition of this commitment and a quality of service, on the part of the firm. Nevertheless the results suggest, first of all, that strongly-engaged individuals do not generate more or fewer written complaints than those who are weakly engaged. From this perspective, if the complaint is a consequence of the intensity of the customer commitment in the commercial relationship, it is necessary to admit that

the customer holds neither the length of the relationship nor the intensity of the commercial relationship as something significant.

If the results of this study do not validate the effect of commitment and the past trade relationship on CB occurrence, they do confirm the role of the order's characteristics. The fewer articles a customer buys, the more the relative importance of each article increases. This strongly affects the customer's commitment. When dissatisfaction is created by a delay in delivery the customer will seek redress. The consequences are significant — the higher the amount of the order, the more the customer will tend to request a refund of their order.

Everything thus seems to suggest that the past relation has no importance and that a firm has only to consider the current relationship as well as the commitment generated by the characteristics of the order. Such results indicate that the quality of service offered by the firm should be permanent and updated with every new transaction in a trade relationship. The determinants of CB highlighted here have evident implications for managers. For a mail-order firm it is quite easy to prioritise orders by amount and number of items requested, regardless of the nature of previous transactions.

Following Bearden and Teel⁵⁴ or Feick⁵⁵ it was supposed that a complaint in writing was more likely when the customer had complained by telephone

beforehand. A written complaint is considered to be more serious and involve more engagement than a complaint by telephone. Although this hypothesis has not been verified here, this can be explained by the specific characteristics of the customer sample. The mail-order firm's customers are older and do not necessarily find the telephone requires less engagement than writing a letter. It thus seems necessary to explain the results obtained in this study on the basis of the sociodemographic characteristics of the customer sample and to strengthen the notion of a progressive process in CB.

Future research should investigate other forms of complaint associated with other motives for complaint. Even if studies of this type are difficult to manage due to the problem of collecting information in a commercial environment, they can favour the development of a fruitful theoretical framework which links commitment theory with the concepts of loyalty, satisfaction and complaint.

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