Customer satisfaction as a basis for targeting online buyers

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Abstract In selected segments of the event management industry, online buyers are being targeted in order to realise cost savings in the areas of registration, confirmation and client database management. Yet little is known about possible revenue-side impacts of targeting online versus traditional buyers. This study examined multiple measures of postconsumption satisfaction for a well-known annual event and looked for differences between online versus traditional buyers. At issue is whether online buyers are intrinsically more (less) satisfied than traditional buyers. Also, the relationships between customer expectations and satisfaction and between satisfaction and repurchase intent are examined for both online and traditional buyers.

INTRODUCTION

For many years marketing educators and researchers have considered customer satisfaction, defined as 'pleasurable fulfillment' by Oliver,¹ a conceptually sound and practical postconsumption outcome measure. Satisfaction studies have been a mainstay of the marketing research industry in Europe and the USA, and they are a staple of online researchers as well. Satisfaction has not, however, been without its critics. Reichheld^{2,3} led a challenge to satisfaction as a useful predictor of behaviour and has argued for replacing it as an operational target with loyalty. Upon scrutiny, however, loyalty does not appear in all or even most instances to be a reasonable goal.⁴ Pending further developments in postconsumption research, therefore, satisfaction remains a widespread, if not unchallenged, preliminary measure of marketing effectiveness.

A satisfaction relationship of great interest to both scholars and practising managers is that between expectations, satisfaction and repurchase intent. The theoretical underpinnings among these constructs are clear, and Rust and Zahorik⁵ modelled and estimated the relationship between satisfaction, loyalty, retention, market share and profit. Thus, to the extent that a consumption experience singularly exceeds client expectations and generates a hugely satisfied customer base who are more likely to repurchase, then satisfaction remains a key management concern.

This study extends the customer satisfaction literature by examining the effects on expectations, satisfaction and repurchase intent of a customer characteristic of increasing concern to many companies: online purchasing. At heart is the question of whether there are intrinsic differences in expectations, satisfaction and repurchase intent

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between online and traditional buyers that argue for targeting either segment. Specific research objectives are:

- (1) to measure expectations, satisfaction and repurchase intent;
- (2) to search for differences, if any, in satisfaction between online and traditional buyers;
- (3) to investigate the relationship between customer expectations and satisfaction and to look for differences between online and traditional buyers;
- (4) to investigate the relationship between satisfaction and repurchase intent and to look for differences between online and traditional buyers.

The paper presentation is as follows. The following section summarises the relevant literature pertaining to satisfaction and the relationship between customer satisfaction and consumer characteristics. The next describes the current study and explains how it extends the work of previous researchers. The fourth and fifth parts present research hypotheses to be investigated and the research design to be implemented. The results are then reported in the sixth part, and conclusions and recommendations are offered in the final part.

SELECTED SATISFACTION RESEARCH

The centrality of satisfaction

The precise role and importance of satisfaction in buyer behaviour are well known. Among others, Oliver⁶⁻⁸ has presented and clearly developed the behavioural foundations of customer satisfaction; defined and developed a conceptual foundation for consumer loyalty, clarifying its relationship to

satisfaction and identifying prerequisites for building loyalty; and summarised key satisfaction concepts for the special case of services. This research stream presents an expectancy disconfirmation view of consumer satisfaction. It posits that satisfaction with a service is dependent upon, among other things, consumer expectations. When a consumption experience fails to meet expectations, negative disconfirmation is created and customers tend to become dissatisfied. When experience exceeds expectations, positive disconfirmation occurs and customers tend to be satisfied. This research also establishes a theoretical relationship between satisfaction and purchase intent: 'As with any satisfying experience, consumers will respond with higher intentions to repatronize, greater praise, and more favorable recommendations to others'.⁹ Therein lies the theoretical basis for the focus here on consumer expectations, satisfaction and (re)purchase intent.

Oliver's treatise on customer loyalty¹⁰ was an especially important contribution to the satisfaction literature. This analysis provided a strong conceptual response to Reichheld,^{11,12} Jones and Sasser¹³ and others who criticised marketers' focus on customer satisfaction and who advocated focusing instead on customer loyalty. After thoughtfully defining and exploring the satisfaction and loyalty constructs, Oliver observed that: 'A disquieting conclusion from this analysis is that loyalty cannot be achieved or pursued as a reasonable goal by many providers because of the nature of the product category or consumer disinterest. For some firms, satisfaction is the only feasible goal for which they should strive; thus satisfaction remains a worthy pursuit among the consumer marketing community'.¹⁴

Satisfaction and customer characteristics

Until 1996 there had been a marked paucity of reported research linking customer satisfaction to customer characteristics. The author shares Bryant and Cha's observation that the 'who' of customer satisfaction 'is hidden from public view in the proprietary research of individual companies and market research organizations'.¹⁵ This information is clearly valuable and confidential, providing a lucrative basis for targeting customers if clear and identifiable differences in satisfaction exist. Fortunately, two satisfaction studies based on secondary data sources have reported important results and provide direction for further research.

Bryant and Cha¹⁶ studied consumer satisfaction findings for a broad variety of product classes in the USA using the American Customer Satisfaction Index data compiled at the University of Michigan. Among other things, they investigated thoroughly the relationship between customer satisfaction and demographics. The data revealed consistent differences in satisfaction among socioeconomic and demographic groups, irrespective of the industries that customers are evaluating. Satisfaction was generally found to increase with age, to decline with gains in socioeconomic status, to be higher in non-metropolitan areas than in metropolitan areas and to be higher for women than men.

Mittal and Kamakura¹⁷ analysed another large, proprietary database (the J.D. Power and Associates database) in the USA to study satisfaction, repurchase intent and actual repurchase behaviour in a single product class: automobiles. They also explored the moderating influence of customer demographics. Replicating the Bryant and Cha results,¹⁸ they found higher reported satisfaction among women rather than men, among

suburbanites than urbanites, among the older than the younger and, generally speaking, among the less educated rather than the more educated.

Neither of these studies investigated relationships between satisfaction and behavioural characteristics of buyers, a task to which this paper now turns.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study extends the research stream cited above but with two important differences. First, customer satisfaction is studied in greater depth and for a single product rather than for a broad product category or for multiple product categories. The product is a salient athletic event, the Cingular Wireless Iron Horse triathlon, an athletic event held on Father's Day each June in Springfield, Illinois, USA. It includes a 1.5-mile swim, a 45-mile bike ride and a ten-mile run. The Iron Horse is one of the oldest continuous multisport events in the USA. It enjoys a highly brand loyal client base of participants residing largely within the upper midwest states.

The research team, including the event management and researchers, agreed to investigate overall satisfaction with the event (overall satisfaction) and satisfaction with each of seven key event attributes (attribute satisfaction): registration/packet pickup, the swim, the transition area, the bike, the run, the post-event meal and awards ceremony. The relative importance of the attributes is also assessed and the importance/satisfaction findings used to offer actionable marketing recommendations.

A second difference here is that, rather than examining satisfaction versus consumer demographics, the relationship between satisfaction and a single behavioural characteristic, online versus traditional buying, is studied. This focus

reflected the event management's observation that a growing number of competitors were consciously targeting and filling their events to full capacity with online buyers, ie participants who registered and paid using online subscription vendors. While there are thought to be modest cost savings to targeting online buyers, the revenue-side implications attributable to satisfaction and repurchase intent are unknown.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The first two hypotheses address differences between overall satisfaction for online and traditional buyers and between attribute satisfaction for online versus traditional buyers. Thus:

- H₁: There are no differences between overall satisfaction scores of online versus traditional buyers.
- H₂: There are no differences between attribute satisfaction scores of online versus traditional buyers.

The next two hypotheses investigate the relationship between pre-event expectations and post-event satisfaction for the entire client base and look for differences between online and traditional buyers.

- H₃: There is no relationship between customer expectations and overall satisfaction for the entire client base.
- H₄: There is no relationship between customer expectations and overall satisfaction for either online or traditional buyers.

Finally, the relationship between satisfaction and repurchase intent for the entire client base is investigated and differences between online versus traditional buyers looked for.

- H₅: There is no relationship between overall satisfaction and repurchase intent for the entire client base.
- H₆: There is no relationship between overall satisfaction and repurchase intent for either online or traditional buyers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design consisted of a mixed-mode survey of the 2001 Cingular Wireless Iron Horse triathlon's entire client base. In hopes of improving the response rate, participants were not randomly assigned to treatment groups (web versus mail survey) in classic experimental design fashion. Rather, they were assigned on the basis of their payment mode. Researchers sent an e-mail URL embedded questionnaire to 233 clients who had registered and paid for the event online and sent the same questionnaire by mail to 301 participants who had registered and paid for the event through the postal service. Accordingly, there is a chance that these results are attributable, in part at least, to unknown factors that are not randomly distributed across study groups.

Five aspects of design and implementation received special attention.

Timing

Claycomb *et al.*¹⁹ explored the effects of using different time intervals for mail survey follow-ups and found no differences in response rates for different intervals. Experience and exploratory research suggested, however, that participants in high involvement events such as triathlons experience a strong sense of exhilaration for a short period after the event. As they prepare for another event, perhaps as soon as seven days later, the level of personal involvement diminishes rapidly.

Therefore, mail surveys were posted on the Monday morning immediately following the Sunday event to assure timely receipt. In turn, the e-mail surveys were sent at midday on Tuesday to minimise the time of separation between the receipt of surveys by mail and e-mail respondents.

Issue salience

Heberlein and Baumgartner²⁰ and Roberson and Sundstrom²¹ found that issue salience was a key predictor of mail survey response rates. In this study, the research team had two concerns about issue salience. On the one hand, issue salience was expected to be high, since the event is a physically challenging one that involves sustained training and preparation. On the other hand, salience was expected to dissipate rapidly.

Several measures were taken to exploit fully the expected high level of issue salience. First, the cover letter was sent from the event manager rather than from researchers in an effort to personalise the exchange and to benefit from the strong reputation that the event appeared to enjoy among the participants. Secondly, the event logo was included in both the cover letter and the survey instrument to heighten recall and awareness.

Follow up

Based on the researcher's own experience and that of MacElroy,²² a follow up e-mail questionnaire was sent two days after the original questionnaire. A reminder postcard was sent to postal survey recipients three days after the original mailing.

Research affiliation

Fox *et al.*²³ concluded that university sponsorship was the most influential of

three response-inducing strategies over which researchers have control. Earlier work by Dillman²⁴ also associated university sponsorship with the concept of trust and credibility. Therefore, the cover letter informed recipients that responses would be returned to a university survey research office and that this organisation would assure the anonymity of individual responses.

Response incentives

Researchers have long recognised and continue to study the possible response-inducing impacts of incentives.^{25,26} In this study, both the researchers and the event manager questioned the efficacy and appropriateness of using traditional incentives for three reasons. First, respondents in proprietary research are actual clients, not prospective purchasers. As such, reasonably higher response likelihood might be expected *a priori*. Secondly, as noted above, issue salience was expected to be sufficiently high to induce a favourable response rate. Thirdly, the research team felt strongly that an incentive might actually dilute the strength of the personal relationship between the well-known management team of the long-standing event and its customer base. Consequently, the research team chose not to offer an incentive.

Altogether, the measures described above incorporate the spirit of Turley's perspective of effective response rate inducing methodology in mail surveys:

'There is, it appears, no single determinant or winning formula of response-inducing strategies which can be employed to maximize response to postal surveys. Success is thus achievable only through careful survey design and administrative planning; identifying each aspect of the survey process

Table 1: Satisfaction scores and importance ratings

Event component	Satisfaction				Importance			
	Rank	Mean	Std. error	<i>n</i>	Rank	Mean	Std. error	<i>n</i>
Overall event		6.39	0.040	333				
Bike	1	6.48	0.041	335	1	6.48	0.042	341
Run	2	6.46	0.047	333	3	6.40	0.049	342
Transition area	3	6.40	0.052	338	4	6.26	0.050	342
Swim	4	6.13	0.064	335	2	6.45	0.045	341
Registration	5	6.10	0.059	337	5	5.10	0.070	341
Awards	6	4.79	0.082	256	7	3.49	0.097	340
Post-race meal	7	4.40	0.091	318	6	4.41	0.090	340

Spearman's rho rank-order correlation = 0.857 (significance = 0.014)

that may effect the nature of response and managing each in order to obtain the best possible response'.²⁷

RESULTS

The overall response rate for the survey was 64.0 per cent. The response rate for online buyers was 56.7 per cent, and the response rate from traditional buyers was 69.8 per cent.

Overall satisfaction and satisfaction/importance by attribute

The satisfaction measure used here consisted of a seven-item Likert scale (7 = extremely satisfied, 1 = extremely dissatisfied, 4 = about equal). Table 1 presents overall satisfaction scores, attribute satisfaction scores and attribute importance ratings.

As a whole, the satisfaction scores are quite high. The mean score for the overall event is 6.39, and the scores for five of seven attributes range from 6.10 (registration) to 6.48 (the bike). Satisfaction scores for the remaining two attributes, the awards and post race meal, are fully two points lower, 4.79 and 4.40, respectively. The standard errors are relatively higher for these two activities, indicating greater disagreement among satisfaction scores.

The final four columns in Table 1

present the mean importance ratings (measured on a seven-point scale from 1 = not important to 7 = extremely important) for the seven attributes. The similarity between the satisfaction scores and importance ratings is immediately evident. Attributes receiving the highest satisfaction scores tend to be rated most important and vice versa. The Spearman's rank-order coefficient is 0.857 (significant at the 0.014 level), confirming the significance of the correlation between the rank orderings of satisfaction and importance.

Finally, the satisfaction scores for four of the five most important attributes, all but the swim, equal or exceed their importance ratings.

Satisfaction by buyer type

Table 2 reports overall satisfaction scores for the online and traditional buyers (H_1). The mean overall satisfaction scores for the two groups are very close, 6.36 and 6.41 respectively, for online and traditional buyers. The difference is not significant, and H_1 cannot be rejected. It is concluded that there is no difference in overall satisfaction between online and traditional buyers.

Mean attribute satisfaction scores for online and traditional buyers (H_2) are also presented in Table 2. Satisfaction for all but one attribute (post-race meal) is

Table 2: Satisfaction by buyer type

Event component	Buyer type	<i>n</i>	Mean satisfaction	Std. error	<i>t</i> -Value	Significance
Overall event	Online	132	6.36	0.053	-0.630	0.529
	Traditional	201	6.41	0.057		
Registration	Online	131	6.07	0.087	-0.433	0.665
	Traditional	206	6.12	0.079		
Transition area	Online	132	6.38	0.068	-0.363	0.717
	Traditional	206	6.42	0.073		
Swim	Online	131	5.93	0.108	-2.478	0.014*
	Traditional	204	6.25	0.078		
Bike	Online	132	6.47	0.063	-0.215	0.830
	Traditional	203	6.49	0.053		
Run	Online	131	6.39	0.077	-1.192	0.234
	Traditional	202	6.50	0.060		
Post-race meal	Online	128	4.42	0.141	0.203	0.839
	Traditional	190	4.38	0.119		
Awards	Online	111	4.66	0.116	-1.448	0.149
	Traditional	145	4.90	0.114		

* Significant at the 0.05 level

lower among online buyers, but the differences are very small. In only one case, the swim, is the difference significant. Thus, H_2 cannot be rejected for these six attributes and it is concluded that there are no differences in satisfaction between online and traditional buyers.

Overall satisfaction and expectations

Expectancy disconfirmation is framed in terms of whether event finish times exceeded, matched or fell short of expected finish times. Finish time is a clear and unambiguous outcome measure, the importance of which is illustrated by the furious punching of stopwatches as contestants cross the finish line. The tendency of participants to rejoice or despair over times at the finish line is part of the lore of the sport. Expectations were therefore measured using a six-item Likert scale (1 = greatly exceeded my expectations, 5 = failed to meet my expectations, 6 = didn't know what to expect).

The findings regarding buyer expectations and overall satisfaction are presented in Table 3. The results

conform to theoretical expectations and are highly significant. For the entire client base, there is a strong, positive (Kendall's correlation coefficient = 0.316) and highly significant relationship ($p = 0.000$) between actual versus expected outcomes and satisfaction (H_3). Participants who reported that the event tended to exceed their expectations also tended to report higher levels of satisfaction and vice versa. Thus, of those reporting that the event greatly exceeded expectations (the highest expectations category), 73 per cent reported the highest level of satisfaction (extremely satisfied); of those reporting that the event slightly exceeded expectations (the next highest expectations category), 53 per cent reported the next highest satisfaction category (satisfaction = 6); and so forth. On the basis of these findings H_3 is firmly rejected.

Table 3 also reports that the expectations/satisfaction relationship is both direct and highly significant for both the online and traditional buyers (H_4). Moreover, the correlation between expectations and satisfaction is very close for both groups. The Kendall's correlation coefficient is 0.322

Table 3: Expectations and overall satisfaction: All buyers and by buyer type

Group being analysed	Overall satisfaction rating	Actual versus expected performance			
		Greatly exceeded expectations	Slightly exceeded expectations	Met expectations	Did not meet expectations
All buyers	Satisfaction = 7 (extremely satisfied)	73.2% (60)	46.8% (59)	34.3% (35)	9.1% (1)
	Satisfaction = 6	26.8% (22)	53.2% (67)	52.0% (53)	45.5% (5)
	Satisfaction = 1–5	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	13.7% (14)	45.5% (5)
	Total	100.0% (82)	100.0% (129)	100.0% (102)	100.0% (11)
	Kendall's tau-c correlation = 0.316 (significance = 0.000**)				
Online buyers	Satisfaction = 7 (extremely satisfied)	69.7% (23)	35.8% (19)	26.5% (9)	20.0% (1)
	Satisfaction = 6	30.3% (10)	64.2% (34)	61.8% (21)	40.0% (2)
	Satisfaction = 1–5	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	11.8% (4)	40.0% (2)
	Total	100.0% (33)	100.0% (53)	100.0% (34)	100.0% (5)
	Kendall's tau-c correlation = 0.322 (significance = 0.000**)				
Traditional buyers	Satisfaction = 7 (extremely satisfied)	75.5% (12)	54.8% (40)	38.2% (68)	0.0% (0)
	Satisfaction = 6	24.5% (37)	45.2% (33)	47.1% (32)	50.0% (3)
	Satisfaction = 1–5	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	14.7% (10)	50.0% (3)
	Total	100.0% (49)	100.0% (73)	100.0% (68)	100.0% (6)
	Kendall's tau-c correlation = 0.318 (significance = 0.000**)				

**Significant at the 0.01 level

($p = 0.000$) for online buyers and 0.318 ($p = 0.000$) for traditional buyers. H_4 is firmly rejected for both online and traditional buyers.

Taken together, these findings strongly confirm the theoretical importance of expectations to reported satisfaction for the entire customer base and for both buyer types.

Overall satisfaction and repurchase intent

Table 4 presents satisfaction and repurchase intent findings. Repurchase intent was measured with a five-item

Likert scale (1 = definitely will race Iron Horse, 4 = definitely will not race Iron Horse, 5 = not sure).

For the entire client base, the data confirm a strong, positive (Kendall's coefficient = 0.220) and significant ($p = 0.000$) relationship between overall satisfaction and repurchase intent (H_5). Among those reporting the highest satisfaction (extremely satisfied), 54 per cent expressed the highest level of repurchase intent (definitely will race next year). Among those reporting the next highest satisfaction level (satisfaction = 6), 58 per cent signalled the next highest repurchase intent

Table 4: Overall satisfaction and repurchase intent: All buyers and by buyer type

Group being analysed	Repurchase intent	Overall satisfaction rating		
		Satisfaction = 7 (extremely satisfied)	Satisfaction = 6	Satisfaction = 1–5
All buyers	Definitely will race	53.8% (86)	27.6% (42)	35.0% (7)
	Probably will race	36.3% (58)	57.9% (88)	40.0% (8)
	Won't race or don't know	10.0% (16)	14.5% (22)	25.0% (5)
	Total	100.0% (160)	100.0% (152)	100.0% (20)
	Kendall's tau-b correlation = 0.220 (significance = 0.000**)			
Online buyers	Definitely will race	52.7% (29)	28.6% (20)	42.9% (3)
	Probably will race	38.2% (21)	58.6% (41)	42.9% (3)
	Won't race or don't know	9.1% (5)	12.9% (9)	14.3% (1)
	Total	100.0% (55)	100.0% (70)	100.0% (7)
	Kendall's tau-b correlation = 0.183 (significance = 0.027*)			
Traditional buyers	Definitely will race	54.3% (57)	26.8% (22)	30.8% (4)
	Probably will race	35.2% (37)	57.3% (47)	38.5% (5)
	Won't race or don't know	10.5% (11)	15.9% (13)	30.8% (4)
	Total	100.0% (105)	100.0% (82)	100.0% (13)
	Kendall's tau-b correlation = 0.243 (significance = 0.000**)			

*Significant at the 0.05 level

**Significant at the 0.01 level

(probably will race next year). Finally, among those responding in the lowest five satisfaction categories (satisfaction = 1–5), 25 per cent indicated the lowest repurchase intent. H_5 is strongly rejected. As predicted by theory, there is a positive relationship between satisfaction and repurchase intent.

The satisfaction/repurchase intent results for buyer groups are similar. Both online and traditional buyers demonstrate positive Kendall's correlation coefficients (0.183 and 0.243, respectively) that are highly significant ($p = 0.027$ and $p = 0.000$, respectively). H_6 is strongly rejected for both online and traditional buyers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, these results are plausible, theoretically predictable and well behaved. Perhaps this is to be expected given the high and personally involving nature of the product and the brand-specific nature of the data. It is noted once again that these findings do not necessarily provide a basis for generalising to a broader product category, and this is not done here.

The goal of this research was a recommendation regarding possible targeting of online buyers for special customer relationship building. Taken together, the findings provide no plausible basis for targeting online buyers

or, for that matter, either particular buyer group. First, both online and traditional buyers reported high satisfaction with the event studied and with most of its key attributes. There are no indications of pervasive, significant differences in satisfaction between buyer groups. Secondly, both online and traditional buyers report a positive relationship between expectations and satisfaction, ie they tended to report higher satisfaction as the event tended to exceed their expectations and vice versa. It is concluded that higher satisfaction will accompany higher positive disconfirmation among both online and traditional buyers.

Thirdly, both online and traditional buyers reported a positive relationship between satisfaction and repurchase intent, ie they tended to report higher repurchase intent as satisfaction tended to be higher and vice versa. It is concluded that higher repurchase intent will accompany higher satisfaction among both online and traditional buyers. In conclusion, while targeting online buyers may earn cost savings, no intrinsic revenue-side advantages are found.

These findings support four recommendations. First, consistent with both previous research findings and experience,^{28,29} event management should consider focusing their immediate efforts on strengthening the two attributes with the lowest satisfaction scores (awards ceremony and post-event meal). Although these activities also received the two lowest importance scores, returns to investment here are likely to be higher than for the other five activities where satisfaction is already very high.

Secondly, management should consider discontinuing the use of a satisfaction scale due to the highly skewed response distribution found here and by other researchers.^{30,31} Even the modified satisfaction scale proposed by Sambandam

and Hausser³² would be skewed with such response distributions. Perhaps the 'improvement needed' scale proposed by Waddell³³ would provide a broader and more actionable set of responses for supporting continuous improvement.

Thirdly, management should carefully study its entire promotional programme to encourage realistic expectations and to reduce negative disconfirmation among participants. Perhaps this might mean encouraging participants to 'Celebrate Father's Day at the Iron Horse Triathlon' rather than 'Come to the Iron Horse for the race of your life'.

Finally, as applications for the following year's event are received, management should track carefully the repurchase behaviour of this year's event participants. If clients who report higher satisfaction and higher repurchase intent are also higher repurchasers, then a carefully targeted and aggressive customer relationship management programme is called for. These findings suggest that such clients will be found in both buyer groups.

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