

EXCUSE MAKING: A PREVALENT COMPANY RESPONSE TO COMPLAINTS?

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ABSTRACT

This research considered organizational excuse making as part of the complaint management process. Company responses to customer complaint letters were examined. Based upon excuse theory, five types of excuses were studied. The results showed that over 50% of the companies who replied to a complaint letter did so by offering at least one type of excuse. Deflection (blaming some-one else) and explanation (minimizing blameworthiness by citing extenuating circumstances) were the most frequent types of excuses provided. Compared to companies who offered no excuse, excuses were more likely to result in the belief that the company could not control and could not avoid the problem. The results also showed that either answering the customer's complaint with a letter, or including financial compensation, had a positive impact on consumers' perceptions of the firm.

INTRODUCTION

Every marketing manager must develop approaches to effectively respond to customer complaints. The marketing literature tells us very little about how to actually do this. Notably absent, is any sustained investigation of firm or employee excuse making; it is as if marketers believed that firms did not make excuses for their errors. As consumers, however, this does not fit with some of our own personal experiences. It seems not at all unusual for either organizations or front-line employees to make excuses for their errors. In fact, Resnick and Harmon (1983) reported that 52% of the managers in their study thought that an explanation, i.e., an excuse, was necessary when a customer complained. (Only 34.5% of complaining customers thought that an explanation was necessary). Bitner (1990) reported that explanations for service failures can successfully mitigate consumer dissatisfaction.

Customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction issues are becoming the centerpiece of marketing management strategies. Historically, much of this

focus has been directed at wooing new customers rather than on pleasing and keeping present customers (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987). More recently, however, the importance of minimizing customer turnover is being recognized. At the heart of this concern has been the growth of a body of research that has focused on the measurement of consumers' post-purchase feelings of satisfaction and on the way consumers react to dissatisfaction. Studies have primarily focused on one particular outcome of dissatisfaction - consumer complaining behavior. The extent and type of complaining behavior has been documented (Day and Ash 1979), models of complaint behavior have been developed (Day 1984; Intrusion 1987; Singh 1988), and some factors that predict the propensity to complain have been identified (Day and Landon 1976; Richins 1982; Folkes 1984).

An important facet of customer satisfaction that has received relatively little attention is the complaint-management process. How should firms respond to complaints? What effect does their response have on the customer? It is becoming widely agreed that complaints have value and that, in order to develop a consumer-focused attitude, disgruntled customers should be encouraged to voice their complaints (Plymire 1991; Bearden and Teel 1980; Goodwin and Ross 1990). Less we forget, complaints left unmanaged have little value to the organization. They do, however, afford companies the opportunity to enhance consumer goodwill through effective complaint handling. Failing to capitalize on this opportunity leaves the complainer less likely to repatronize the offending business (Bearden and Teel 1983; Gilly 1987; Gilly and Gelb 1982) and more likely to engage in other types of complaining behavior, e.g., negative word-of-mouth, exit, third-party complaints (Blodgett and Granbois 1992). Ultimately, the consumer's final level of satisfaction is a combination of their original product or service experience and their satisfaction with the complaint resolution (Krentler and Cosenza 1987).

Essentially two types of complaint management studies have been conducted. In one

type of study, surveys are used to document either the ways in which firms respond to complaints and/or consumers' level of satisfaction with the response. These studies report that most firms respond with either coupons or refunds and that 56% to 77% of the complaining customers usually indicate that they are satisfied with the firm's response (Cievro 1980; Andreasen and Best 1977; Kendall and Russ 1975). The second type of study seeks to determine company complaint response variables that affect customer reactions. So far, only a few variables have actually been studied. These studies have almost exclusively examined the effects of a) apologies, b) the speed of the company response, and c) forms of financial restitution such as coupons, refunds and exchanges (Folkes 1984; Gilly and Gelb 1982; Goodwin and Ross, 1990).

In a somewhat different study, Krentler and Cosenza (1987) examined written corporate responses to customer complaints letters. They found that aspects of the company's response had a great bearing on the customer's overall impression of the firm. In particular, the firm's perceived interest in remedying the problem and the extent to which their response directly addressed the customer's problem were the most important variables in recapturing dissatisfied customers. Their study is important because it indicates that aspects of the redress communication itself may be critical to consumer satisfaction and its ultimate consequences.

Hill et al. (1992) contend that excuse making is an important and yet completely overlooked aspect of the complaint-management process. As such, the purpose of this study was to propose an excuse classification scheme and to empirically verify the excuse scheme in a natural setting. Specifically, we wanted to know: (1) How prevalent are excuses, (2) Can types of excuses be reliably classified, and (3) What effects do excuses have?

The present study was based upon a psychological theory of excuse making (Snyder et al. 1983; Snyder and Higgins 1988; Higgins and Snyder, 1991). They define an excuse as a motivated process of (a) diminishing the perceived negativity of events and (b) shifting the causal attribution for negative events away from oneself (Higgins and Snyder 1991). Excuse making is

evoked to the extent that one perceives themselves to be linked to a particular act or outcome (linkage-to-act) and the degree to which the act or outcome is perceived negatively (valence-of-act). Thus, to be effective, an excuse must either diminish one's perceived connection to the act (linkage excuses) or lessen the perceived negativity of the event (valence excuses). Based upon excuse theory, we propose that there are three types of linkage excuses and two types of valence excuses.

Linkage Excuses. (1) Denial excuses attempt to eliminate the perceived linkage to the act by verbally denying that one had anything to do with it. (2) Deflection excuses go beyond mere denial by placing the blame on some other culprit and thereby further disconnecting oneself from the act. Hill et al. (1991) identified organizational characteristics that they proposed were related to a firm's tendency to deflect. (3) Explanation excuses do not completely sever the responsibility link. Rather, explanations seek to lower the sense of condemnation for the act by presenting details that may diminish accountability by providing extenuating circumstances for the poor performance. Explanations imply that the event should not, for the reasons provided, reflect permanently on the excuse maker.

Valence Excuses. (1) Minimization excuses do not seek to lessen or negate ones perceived connection to the event, but instead aspire to lessen the perceived unpleasantness of the event by suggesting that in some way it was not as bad as previously thought. (2) Justifications go beyond minimization by boldly asserting that not only was the event not so bad but it was, in fact, in some way good and that the customer was better off as a result.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Complaint letter research was chosen to examine company excuse making. Previous complaint letter research has been used to identify different types of company responses and consumer satisfaction levels with those responses. However, no studies in the marketing literature were found that explored company responses to complaints with regard to: (1) Whether companies

responded with excuses, (2) the types of excuses used and (3) the effects of excuses on customer reactions.

Subjects

Business majors at a medium sized private university in the Midwest were the subjects of this research. College students are an important market segment. It is estimated that their disposable income is between \$20 and \$45 billion a year, with nearly \$1.5 billion of discretionary income (Simmons Market Research Bureau 1985).

Business students in eight Marketing classes were asked to write letters of complaint to companies whose products had recently caused them genuine dissatisfaction. No format was specified for the letters, but each was to contain the brand name of the product, when and where the product was purchased, and the reason(s) for dissatisfaction. Students were encouraged to address their letter to the president of the company. On the day the complaint letters were sent, an initial questionnaire was administered to each letter writer, asking about demographic data, the nature of the product, the approximate price, and their previous experience with the product.

A total of 221 students wrote complaint letters. To facilitate data gathering, each letter contained the return address of one of the authors. Approximately one month after the complaint letters were mailed, all company reply letters along with any "free goods" received were returned to the students. Before returning to the students, all letters were photocopied for later analysis of type and frequency of excuses, compensation received, and other details of the company response. When the letters were returned to the students, they were given a second questionnaire which was designed to measure the effects of the company's response on perceptions of the company. This procedure was repeated every two weeks for a total of eight weeks. At the end of the eight weeks, each letter writer who had not yet received a response was asked to complete the questionnaire based on their feelings that no response had been received.

The second questionnaire contained twenty-seven items. These items were chosen from a review of the excuse making literature (Snyder et al. 1983; Higgins and Snyder 1991) but expressed

in the context of consumer complaint behavior. Additional items from the consumer complaint literature were also included.

Analysis of Questionnaire

Principal components analysis was employed to identify underlying dimensions among the twenty-seven items from the second questionnaire. Six dimensions were observed, of which the first five were interpretable and used in subsequent analyses. The last factor was dropped due to interpretational difficulty and low internal consistency. A summated scale of the items with high loadings ($> .40$) was computed to represent each of the five dimensions (along with coefficient alpha). Effects of the company's response (or lack of response) on customer's perceptions of the company evolve around 1) satisfaction with the response (11 items; alpha = .96), 2) company credibility (4 items; alpha = .91), 3) perceived company control (4 items; alpha = .72), 4) the company's ability to avoid or foresee the problem (2 items), and 5) the negativity of the outcome (2 items). Since one should not put much credence into alpha levels computed from two- and three-item scales (Ruekert and Churchill 1984), alpha levels on the last two dimensions were not calculated. See Table 1 for a list of the individual items.

Table 1
Items Making Up Perceptions of the Company

Satisfaction with the Response to the Complaint*

- How satisfied are you with the response from the company?
- How genuine was the company response?
- How likely are you to buy this product again?
- How fair with customers is this company?
- How concerned for customers is this company?
- How interested in consumer opinions do you think this company is?
- How courteous to customers is this company?
- How understanding of the customer is this company?
- How sympathetic is this company to customers?
- Was adequate explanation offered to you regarding your complaint?

Table 1 (cont.)**Company Credibility**

How concerned is this company with quality?
 How credible is this company?
 How reputable do you think this firm is?
 How competent is this company?

Perceived Company Control

To what extent is the company to blame for the problem?
 To what extent was the problem caused by something or someone outside of the company (e.g., bad luck, weather, another customer, etc.)**
 To what extent was the problem beyond the company's control?***
 To what extent is the company responsible for the problem?

Company's Ability to Avoid or Foresee the Problem

To what extent do you think the company could have foreseen this problem?
 To what extent could the company have avoided the problem?

Negativity of the Outcome

How unpleasant was this experience?
 How much harm did you experience?

* All items were coded on a seven point scale anchored by 1 not at all to 7 very much so.

** Reverse Coded

Analysis of Company Excuses

A content analysis of the companies' responses was conducted to determine the extent and type of excuse making activity. Content analysis, which typically entails a systematic assessment and classification of verbal content based on a predetermined categorization scheme, has a long-standing tradition (Sayre 1992). Frequency tabulations resulting from this type of analysis facilitate identification and comparisons of patterns across types of excuses.

Two business-school graduate students were employed as coders. After a brief training session, the students, in a trial session, coded 20 model business letters from a training manual, using a coding scheme based on excuse theory (see Table 2). After this exercise, all company response letters were coded by both judges. In cases where the coders disagreed, a panel of judges consisting of two faculty members jointly categorized the excuse type.

**Table 2
Excuse Type Coding Scheme:
Operationalization of Excuses****Denial**

Eliminating one's linkage to the act by disavowing one had anything to do with it
 e.g., references such as "It wasn't us," "We didn't do it," or "We have no record of this event."

Deflection

Eliminating one's linkage to the act by blaming someone else
 e.g., references such as manufacturer blaming retailer or another channel member, an employee blaming a superior, or someone blaming an external event such as an airline delay due to bad weather or a product damaged due to heat exposure; also references to "our clerk forgot," "the salesperson did not make it clear," or "our instructions did not reach all our employees."

Explanation

Reducing one's linkage to the act by lessening the sense of condemnation
 e.g., references to extenuating circumstances, or suggestions that the negative event is not a permanent reflection on one's abilities; also references to "unusual," "rare," "inevitable," "unintentional," "uncontrollable," "unforeseeable," or "everyone makes mistakes."

Minimization

Reducing the perceived unfavorableness of the event
 e.g., references such as "It wasn't so bad," or "It can't be as bad as you describe it."

Justification

Eliminating the perceived unfavorableness of the event by asserting that it was actually good for the customer
 e.g., "preventive maintenance prevents costly future repairs," "half-filled containers prevent the merchandise from being broken."

RESULTS**Complaint Characteristics**

Of the 221 complaints lodged, 85 concerned products in the \$0 - \$5.00 price range, 46 were in the \$6.00 - \$25.00 price range, 40 ranged from \$26.00 to \$100.00, and 29 complaints were valued at more than \$100.00. (Twenty one subjects did not specify a monetary value). One hundred and

five complaints were registered about goods, 14 about services and 10 concerned both goods and services. Subjects indicated a considerable amount of anger with their dissatisfying experience. Average anger ratings were 4.9 on a 7-point scale (1= not at all angry, 7= very angry). Also, subjects tended to have prior experience with the product or service about which they complained. Average experience ratings equaled 5.2 on a 7-point scale (1= not at all experienced, 7= very experienced).

Response Characteristics

Ninety-two (41.6 %) of the complaint writers did not receive a response, thus 129 responses were received. This 58.4% response rate is somewhat lower than the response rates reported in similar studies. Seventy-nine of the company letters contained an apology to the letter writer; eighty-nine of the companies expressed appreciation to the customer for writing. Overall, 47 responses consisted of a letter and coupons, 17 responses consisted of a letter and a free good, 3 responses consisted of a letter, a free good and coupons, and 62 responses consisted of a letter-only.

Excuse Effects

Of the 129 letters received, 67 (51.9%) contained at least one type of excuse. A total of 97 different excuses were offered. The frequency of the different excuse types is shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Frequency and Types of Excuses Provided

Excuse Type	Frequencies	Percentages
Denial	12	12.4%
Explanation	30	30.9%
Deflection	46	47.4%
Minimization	4	4.1%
Justification	5	5.2%
Total	97	100.0%

The table shows that the most common excuse type

was deflection (46 cases), followed by explanation (30), denial (12), minimization (5), and justification (4). Coders agreed on the classification of excuses for each of the following five types of excuses as follows: 1) denial 92.5%, 2) deflection 71%, 3) explanation 82.5%, 4) minimization 98%, and 5) justification 98%.

Although it was originally anticipated that each of the five types of excuses could be tested separately for effects, the small number of some of the excuse types precluded that option. Therefore, the five different types of excuses were grouped together. Subjects whose letter contained an excuse were compared to subjects whose letter contained no excuse. (Subjects who received no reply were excluded from this analysis). The means of the summated scales for each of the five response dimensions are shown in Table 4. These results indicate that writers of complaint letters who received no excuse were more likely (M=22.25) than subjects who received an excuse (M=19.09) to believe that the company had control over the problem (t=2.43). Also, subjects who received no excuse were more likely (M=9.95) to believe that the company could have avoided the problem than subjects who did receive an excuse (M=8.75, t=2.43).

Table 4
Effects of Excuses

Response Measures	Summated Mean Score		t	Prob.
	Excuse	No Excuse		
Satisfaction with the Response	57.03	60.10	1.18	.242
Company Credibility	23.12	23.87	.90	.371
Perceived Company Control	19.09	22.25	3.34	.001
Company's Ability to Avoid the Problem	8.75	9.95	2.43	.016
Negativity of the Outcome	6.49	6.66	.32	.751
Number of Responses	63*	56**		

* 4 cases were not analyzed due to missing data

** 6 cases were not analyzed due to missing data

Effects of Firm Reply Letter

The effects of a company written reply were also examined. Subjects who received a written answer were compared to subjects whose complaint received no reply. The results are shown in Table 5. These results indicate that writers of complaint letters who received a reply ($M=58.49$) were more likely than subjects who received no reply ($M=35.49$) to be satisfied with the response ($t=6.70$). Also, subjects who received a reply ($M=23.48$) were more likely than subjects who received no reply ($M=18.38$) to believe that the company was more credible. Similarly, the perception of company's ability to avoid the problem was less for those who received a reply ($M=9.31$), than for those who received no reply ($M = 10.73$) ($t=3.68$). Finally, those who received a reply letter were more likely to perceive the negativeness of the event as less ($M = 6.65$) than those who received no reply ($M = 7.87$) ($t = 2.92$).

Table 5
Effects of a Firm Reply Letter

Response measure	Summated Mean Score			t	Prob.
	Reply	No Reply			
Satisfaction with the Response	58.48	35.49	6.70		.000
Company Credibility	23.48	18.38	5.61		.000
Perceived Company Control	20.59	21.76	1.50		.135
Company's Ability to Avoid the Problem	9.31	10.73	3.68		.000
Negativity of the Outcome	6.65	7.87	2.92		.004
Number of Responses	119*	63**			

* 2 cases were not analyzed due to missing data
** 29 cases were not analyzed due to missing data

Effects of Financial Compensation

Finally, subjects who received some type of financial compensation were compared to those who received a written reply without any compensation. The results presented in Table 6 indicate that receiving compensation, (whether in the form of coupons, a free good, or both a free

good and a coupon), ($M = 64.82$ for those who received compensation compared to $M = 51.58$ for those who did not) positively impacted satisfaction with the response ($t = 5.49$), company credibility ($M = 24.47$ for those who received compensation compared to $M = 22.40$ for those who did not) ($t = 2.51$). The perception of the negativity of the outcome for those who received compensation ($M = 5.88$) was also less than for those who did not receive compensation ($M = 7.32$) ($t = 2.75$).

Table 6
Effects of Financial Compensation

Response Measures	Summated Mean Score		t	Prob.
	No Compensation	Compensation		
Satisfaction with the Response	64.82	51.58	5.49	.000
Company Credibility	24.47	22.40	2.51	.013
Perceived Company Control	20.51	20.68	.18	.860
Company's Ability to Avoid the Problem	9.37	9.25	.25	.804
Negativity of the Outcome	5.88	7.32	2.75	.007
Number of Responses	62*	57**		

* 5 cases were not analyzed due to missing data
** 5 cases were not analyzed due to missing data

DISCUSSION

It has not been fashionable in marketing to talk about organizational excuse making. It is as if business organizations did not make excuses for their errors, or that it is somehow wrong or unethical for them to do so. However, although they have a bad reputation, excuses are not necessarily false. They tend to operate in gray areas where there are few objective yardsticks for measuring the "truth" of varying explanations of events (Mehlman and Snyder 1985). The present paper underscores the positive influence of modifying customer attributions with excuse making. This research shows that excuses can be an effective part of the complaint management process. Consumers in the present study showed

a tendency to honor the excuse by adjusting their beliefs about the firm's ability to control and avoid the dissatisfying event. By providing information concerning underlying reasons for the dissatisfaction, excuses serve to educate consumers about the complexities of the marketplace. In turn, consumers can use this information to make more informed decisions about repeat purchases and how forgiving they should be.

In this study we examined firms' written responses to customer complaint letters. Of particular interest was the firms' excuse making strategy and the effects of excuse making on customer reactions to the company redress response. The results of the excuse frequency analysis seems to strongly indicate that it is rather commonplace for firms to respond to complaints by making excuses, over fifty percent of the firms in our study who responded to a customer complaint letter did so by advancing at least one excuse. In fact, companies who gave an excuse averaged 1.45 excuses per letter. Thus, we believe that these results show that excuse making is a natural part of the way in which companies respond to complaints. As such, excuse making should be a legitimate aspect of the study of the complaint management process. It is somewhat surprising to us that they have received such scant attention.

We proposed a framework for studying excuses based upon a psychological theory of excuse making. Excuses were classified as either linkage or valence excuses. Linkage excuses (denial, deflection, and explanation) seek to diminish the perceived connection between the accused and the dissatisfying act or outcome. Valence excuses (minimization and justification) seek to diminish the perceived negativity of the dissatisfying event. This categorization scheme proved useful. We received all five types of excuses from companies, although almost 91% of the excuses were linkage excuses. It is apparent that the companies in our sample showed a clear preference for deflection (47.4%) and explanations (30.9%). There were no occasions in which our judges could not classify an excuse into one of the five categories. Moreover, our excuse categories were highly reliable. Our inter-judge reliability ranged from 71% - 98% for each of the five excuse types. Judges agreed the least on the

coding of deflection excuses. Deflection can be quite subtle at times and our judges did not always agree on the subtleties. Judges were most likely to disagree when the company letter writer indicated that he or she would refer the problem to another division within the organization.

We had anticipated that the organization's excuses would affect customer reactions to the redress response and that each excuse type would trigger a distinct reaction. This contention was partially supported. However, since we did not receive a sufficient number of denials, minimizations or justifications, we were not able to analyze the effects of the five different excuse types. Grouping all of the excuses together, we found that the excuses did affect the control and avoidability measures. Excuses were able to mitigate both the perceived avoidability of the event and the company's perceived responsibility for the event. These findings suggest consumers do not see excuses as silly or deceptive maneuvers to disguise the truth. Rather, the subjects in our study seemed to honor the excuse; they attributed less control and less avoidability to companies who offered excuses than to those who did not. These results are consistent with a growing body of attributional research (Bitner, 1990; Folkes, 1984; Folkes and Kotsos, 1985) that indicates that consumer attributions influence how they respond to product failure. An excuse is an attempt to modify the customer's causal attribution for failure by replacing their original and spontaneous attribution with one more sympathetic to the company. Although research suggests (Snyder and Swann 1978; Anderson, Lepper and Ross 1980) that it is difficult to change causal inferences, the results of the present study signify that excuses can indeed modify consumers' interpretation of events. These results also highlight the importance of including excuses in situations where firms are operating in a complex environment over which they have little control. For example, utilities and airlines operate in an environment in which dissatisfaction is likely to occur (power lines go down and flights are canceled due to weather). Excuses in our study had no affect on measures of satisfaction with the complaint resolution or on measures of company credibility. One may have speculated that excuses may have been seen by complaining customers as a way to evade

responsibility for the dissatisfying experience. If so, companies who try to excuse their behavior may be seen as less courteous, fair, sympathetic, and concerned for the customer, etc. Conversely, one could speculate that excuses would have a positive impact on satisfaction with the complaint resolution since excuses did successfully ameliorate perceptions of control and avoidability. However, in our study we found that excuses made virtually no difference on measures of satisfaction, credibility or perceived negativity of the outcome.

These results may indicate that complaining customers are equally satisfied with the complaint resolution regardless of whether an excuse is offered. However, because of methodological limitations to the study, we are cautious about accepting this conclusion. In particular, experimental control in the present study was sacrificed in favor of realism. We thought that it was imperative in this first study to demonstrate the extent to which organizational excuse making occurred. Therefore, genuine complaint letters were written to actual companies by consumers who had authentic complaints. Customers wrote to a variety of different companies about widely differing complaints, about problems ranging from almost no financial damage to over \$2000 worth of damages. Complaint writers followed no prescribed format, addressed their letter to whomever they deemed appropriate, and wrote vastly different letters that varied in both quality and quantity. Company reply letters also varied considerably. A plethora of different excuses were received. Letters differed in tone and the extent to which they genuinely addressed the complaint. Some companies sent coupons and rebates; some offered an apology. Thus, subjects in our experiment did not react to a uniform letter in which important variables were under experimental control.

Despite the apparent widespread belief among consumer oriented firms that customers should be encouraged to voice their complaints, 34.6% of the companies in our sample never responded to the complaint letter. Our results showed that this was the single most damaging way for the company to react. Failing to respond at all affected all factors with the exception of perceived control over the event. Satisfaction with the company response, credibility, avoidability, and the perceived

unpleasantness of the outcome were all negatively impacted when firms did not respond.

In sum, it is important for firms to recognize that aspects of the letter that they send to complaining customers are critical elements in the organization's communication with its customers. Moreover, customers' overall impression of the firm and their satisfaction with the complaint management process are related to aspects of the letter itself. If firms want a positive evaluation of their performance, they should first and foremost be sure to respond to each complaint. Providing financial restitution and an excuse for the dissatisfying performance are also essential. Lastly, excuses should not be offered haphazardly or without thought but should be an integral part of a managed complaint handling system.

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