

# CONSUMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIORS OF MARKET MAVENS

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## ABSTRACT

Market mavens are a group of influential consumers who seek and provide information to other consumers. Research has documented their tendency to provide information on a variety of products, services and marketplace phenomena such as special sales and general prices. Because of their general influence which spans many product categories, mavens should be of particular interest to retailers. Although much has been written about the tendency of mavens to provide marketplace information no previous research has examined the consumer complaint behaviors of mavens. This research does so and finds that mavens report a greater tendency to engage in both private and third-party complaint behaviors when faced with a dissatisfying transaction. Implications for handling consumer complaints are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Market mavens are an important group of consumers which influence others, yet no research has been done which examines their reactions to marketplace dissatisfaction. Given mavens' influence on other consumers it is important to know how they react when dissatisfied. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to study the consumer complaint behaviors (CCB) of market mavens.

Market mavens are consumers who have a great interest in the marketplace, in shopping and in sharing information about the marketplace with other consumers (Feick and Price 1987). They share their knowledge about a variety of products and marketplace issues such as prices, sales, and new products (Slama and Williams 1991). Research on mavens has found them to be early users of new products and brands. They also have a greater tendency than the average person to be an opinion leader for at least one product category (opinion leadership implies a deep interest in one product while being a maven implies a more shallow and general interest in many product categories as well as other aspects of the market,

Feick and Price 1987; Slama and Williams 1991).

It is thought that people may become market mavens because of a generalized interest in the marketplace, or a desire to make smart buying decisions or perhaps out of a desire to use marketplace information in social exchange. Mavens may use the information in social exchange either for altruistic purposes or in the expectation of some reciprocity such as obtaining other information or favors (Feick and Price 1987). The idea that mavens are motivated by a desire to make smart buys is consistent with findings that mavens tend to: use shopping lists, plan grocery shopping with advertising, budget for groceries and use coupons (Price, Feick, and Guskey-Federouch 1988).

Market mavens appear to have a great influence in the retail marketplace. Feick and Price (1987) found that 46 percent of their national sample felt that they knew of someone who fit the description of a market maven and that among those who knew of a market maven 57 percent considered the maven to be either "very important" or "extremely important" in influencing their evaluations of products and brands.

Mavens are important to retail institutions because their influence extends across product categories and includes the provision of information about store characteristics and activities such as pricing and sales. Mavens have been shown to have a greater tendency than others to provide consumers information about grocery stores, department stores and discount stores. The attributes most discussed include: special sales, usual prices, product quality, and product variety (Higie, Feick and Price 1987). The fact that mavens provide information about retail stores makes them an attractive promotional target especially given that they have been shown to read more direct mail advertisements and women's magazines than other consumers (Higie, Feick and Price 1987). Given the significance of market mavens to retailing it is important to understand their reactions to consumer dissatisfaction because these reactions are likely to influence not only the behaviors of mavens, but, also the behaviors of

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other consumers, yet no research has examined this issue.

It is likely that the maven as identified by Feick and Price (1987) overlaps with other groups of information sensitive consumers examined in previous studies and that their reactions to consumer dissatisfaction may be similar. A number of studies have identified groups of consumers particularly interested in the marketplace (Bellenger and Krogaonker 1978; Lesser and Hughes 1986; Raju 1980; Slama and Tashchian 1985; Thorelli and Engledow 1980). Market mavens are perhaps most similar to a group of consumers titled "information seekers". Thorelli and Engledow (1980) identify "information seekers" as making up ten to twenty percent of the population and being opinion leaders, innovators and marketplace vigilantes. If market mavens behave like "information seekers" they will probably be active complainers. Active complaining behavior is also consistent with the underlying motivations of market mavens. Their desires to make smart buys would make mavens particularly motivated to resolve any dissatisfactory purchase experience in such a way as to obtain exactly what they want. In addition, it would seem that negative news about a retailer would be particularly likely to be used in social exchange either for altruistic purposes or in expectation of reciprocity. Therefore, it is hypothesized that market mavens will be active complainers and that they will have a greater tendency than other consumers to exhibit all types of consumer complaint behaviors.

## METHODS AND RESULTS

Numerous attempts have been made to categorize the possible responses to consumer dissatisfaction (Bearden and Teel 1983; Best and Andreasen 1977; Day 1984; Singh and Howell 1985). One taxonomy of complaining behaviors classified CCB in terms of (Singh 1988):

1. Forget about the incident and do nothing.
2. Definitely complain to the store manager on the next trip.
3. Decide not to shop that store/manufacturer again.
4. Go back to the store immediately to complain.

5. Speak to friends and relatives about the bad experience.
6. Convince friends and relatives not to shop the store again.
7. Complain to a consumer agency and ask them to force the store to take care of the problem.
8. Write a complaint letter to the local newspaper.
9. Report to the consumer agency so they can warn other consumers.
10. Take some legal action against the store.

Items 1, 2, and 4 are categorized as voice complaint behaviors. Items 3, 5, and 6 represent private complaint behaviors, and items 7 through 10 are termed third-party complaint behaviors.

Since the listed behaviors suggest an increasing intensity of compliant behavior, it is not appropriate to consider these responses as components of a complaining scale (Singh 1988). Rather they are independent actions which, in some cases, may be employed in combination by a consumer in response to purchase dissatisfaction.

Measuring CCB presents a conceptually difficult problem. Asking consumers what they would normally do when dissatisfied with a purchase without providing product-specific and situation-specific information or asking what they have usually done in the past ignores situational and product related factors which have been shown to be relevant in determining the direction and intensity of complaining behavior. Accordingly, we provided a dissatisfaction scenario together with possible reactions to the problem indicated in the scenario (Figure 1). The use of this scenario causes all subjects to respond to the same dissatisfying situation and therefore reduces error variance due to situational influences.

The product and situation selected for the scenario in this study were ones with which most consumers should be able to readily identify. The scenario was presented as an extreme case (an extreme case was used in order to create more opportunity for individual differences in responses to emerge) where a problem has been encountered and has been unresolved by the first attempt at resolution or redress. The person must now decide where to go from here. An initial complaint has been registered to store management

who has been unresponsive, and a variety of possible reactions are presented. This means that the two behaviors dealing with complaining to the manager as listed in Singh (1988) taxonomy are inappropriate for study in the context of this analysis. The behaviors investigated here would come after complaining to the manager has not been successful in resolving the problem.

**Figure 1**  
**Consumer Complaint Scenario**

Imagine that last week you purchased a jacket for \$150. This week the shoulder ripped beyond repair. You are certain that it ripped because of poor workmanship and not because of your actions. The store management where you bought the jacket refused to exchange it or refund your money. Please indicate how likely it is that you would take each of the following actions by circling a number from one to 10 to the right of the item. The more likely that you would take the indicated action the higher the number you should circle.

Do nothing about the incident. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Decide not to shop at that store again. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Speak to your friends or relatives about your bad experience. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Convince your friends or relatives not to shop at that store. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Complain to a consumer agency and ask them to make the store take care of the problem. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Report to a consumer agency so that other consumers can be warned. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Write a letter to the local newspaper about your bad experience. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Take some formal action against the store/manufacturer. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The first item listed in Figure 1 represents a voice complaint (or the lack of a voice complaint) as defined by Singh (1988).

The second through fourth items represent private complaining behaviors. The other items represent third-party complaint behaviors.

The other measure employed in this study is

the market maven scale (Feick and Price 1987; Figure 2). It consists of six Likert type items (seven point scales anchored by strongly agree and strongly disagree). The items refer to an interest in the marketplace and to a willingness to share information about the marketplace. In this study the maven scale was found to exhibit acceptable internal consistency (alpha = .80; Feick and Price 1987 obtained .82).

**Figure 2**  
**The Market Maven Scale \***

1. I like to introduce new brands to my friends.
2. I like to help people by providing them with information about many kinds of products.
3. People often ask me for information to get the best buy on several types of products, places to shop, or sales.
4. If someone asked me where to get the best buy on several types of products, I could tell the person where to shop.
5. My friends think of me as a good source of information for new products or sales.
6. Think about a person who has information about a variety of products and likes to share this information with others. This person knows about new products, sales, stores, and so on, but does not necessarily feel that he or she is an expert on any one particular product. How strongly would you agree that this description fits you?

\* Feick and Price (1987), p. 95.

The items measuring consumer complaint behaviors and the market maven scale were both included on a self-administered questionnaire which was filled out by 165 undergraduate students. In order to test the hypothesis that mavens complain more intensely than non-mavens a median-split of the sample was employed based on the maven scores and t-tests between high and low scoring groups were performed for each of the consumer complaint behaviors. Recall that significant differences were expected on all of the CCB items in Figure 1. The results are shown in Table 1. The hypothesis is generally supported by significant differences between mavens and non-

mavens on six of the eight CCB. The exceptions were CCB associated with not shopping again at the offending store, and complaining to a consumer agency to get the agency to make the store take care of the problem. The means on these items indicated differences in the expected direction, however, the differences were not large enough to prove statistically significant.

**Table 1**  
**Means for Complaint Intentions for High and Low Scoring Groups on the Market Maven Scale**

<u>Complaint Behaviors</u>	<u>Non-mavens</u>	<u>Mavens</u>
Do nothing about the incident.	2.90	2.06*
Decide not to shop at that store again.	8.12	8.31
Speak to your friends or relatives about your bad experience.	8.26	9.01*
Convince your friends or relatives not to shop at that store.	6.59	7.74*
Complain to a consumer agency and ask them to make the store take care of the problem.	4.90	5.63
Report to a consumer agency so that other consumers can be warned.	2.26	3.65*
Write a letter to the local newspaper about your bad experience.	3.85	4.75*
Take some formal action against the store/manufacturer.	4.42	5.47*

\* Means for maven and non-maven groups different at the .05 level of significance.

### Limitations

Limitations of the present research relate to the complaint domain studied and nature of the sample. First, this study was limited to one complaint scenario related to clothing. Future research should explore scenarios relative to alternative products/services. Also, additional research is needed which replicates and extends the present study through the use of different samples.

Although students are an attractive market segment for various products/services, they present combinations of demographics and psychographics not necessarily represented in other consumer groups. These limitations notwithstanding, the present study highlights the potential significance of examining the complaint behavior of market mavens.

### DISCUSSION

Previous research has documented the importance of consumer complaint resolution to a firm's continued success in the marketplace (Morris 1988). The present study examined a specific segment of the consumer market, mavens, and found them to evidence a greater propensity to engage in most private as well as third party complaint behavior than non-mavens. Firms should recognize that complainers are likely to be mavens and that it is costly to lose the goodwill of mavens given that they are diffusers of marketplace information. Therefore, the current findings reiterate the importance of successful consumer complaint resolution.

Given the findings of the present study, the effective handling of complaints would appear to be of paramount importance to companies. The potential long-term negative impact of extremely dissatisfied mavens (resulting from unsatisfactory product/service experiences compounded by inadequate complaint handling) could be particularly devastating to a firm if these individuals were to turn into grudge holders. Consumers experiencing extreme dissatisfaction were found to be more upset by treatment than performance issues, remain emotionally upset for a long time (i.e., five years or longer), and be champions of negative word of mouth (i.e., some reporting that they continue to "bad mouth" even five to ten years after the incident; Hunt, Hunt, and Hunt 1988). Intuitively, mavens would appear to be particularly prone to grudge holding given their self-investment in the marketplace (i.e., desire to make smart buying decisions and use market information in social exchange).

Based on the foregoing discussion, the handling of complaints warrants the careful consideration of businesses. Goodwin and Ross (1989) suggest that the perceived fairness of a

complaint resolution influences subsequent satisfaction as well as willingness to trust the organization in the future. Tangible compensation and the style of interaction were identified as important determinants of perceived fairness. However, Goodwin and Ross (1989) observed that although expressions of responsiveness or courtesy could contribute to perceptions of fairness, tangible consequences appeared to be more salient to their sample of consumers.

Morris (1988) suggests that responses to complaints should include full explanations of why a problem occurred and what is being done to prevent its recurrence rather than the more typical perfunctory apology and "thank you for letting us know about the problem." This suggestion parallels the finding of Goodwin and Ross (1989) that the content of a response to a complaint is more important than its style. Such a recommendation would seem particularly appropriate as a means of addressing maven complaints given their heightened interest in and use of marketplace information.

In addition to addressing content issues, Morris (1988) also believes it is important to address the underlying feelings of complainants. It is recommended that careful attention be given to the development of responses that are pleasant and apologetic in tone and not patronizing. By attempting to account for the feelings underlying complaint behavior companies may help prevent extreme dissatisfaction and subsequent grudge holding by mavens which could have disastrous long-term consequences owing to a compounding effect of negative word of mouth influence.

In conclusion, the ability to effectively resolve consumer complaints presents companies with opportunities to turn lost customers into loyal customers. By extension, this becomes particularly important given the existence of mavens who, as marketplace influentials, have a greater tendency than non-mavens to engage in most forms of complaint behaviors. Failure to effectively resolve the complaints of consumers who are mavens will probably result in damaging word of mouth communications and may lead to grudge holding.

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