

BRIDGING MENTORING, MARKETING, AND CONSUMER SATISFACTION: THE INFUSE CONCEPT AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

Satisfaction, of both employees and consumers, serves as the central construct linking internal practices with external marketplace outcomes. This research positions satisfaction as the driver of organizational success and introduces the INFUSE mentoring framework as a structured antecedent of satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and complaint behavior. First, it frames the relationship between mentoring and consumer satisfaction as a marketing-related phenomenon arising from enhanced employee satisfaction. Next, the INFUSE Framework is presented as a marketing-based approach to mentoring that functions as a novel pathway into the satisfaction-dissatisfaction-complaint cycle, reframing mentorship as a consumer-like decision-making process with direct implications for satisfaction outcomes. The INFUSE Framework presents six mentoring roles (Industry, Nearby, Firm, Underrepresented, Similar, and Empathetic), offering a systematic, adaptable model for cultivating a robust mentoring network. Through the lens of consumer satisfaction, this research proposes a pathway for organizations to leverage mentoring relationships as a competitive differentiator in service quality, brand advocacy, and customer engagement and satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer and employee satisfaction are critical determinants of business success, influencing loyalty, complaint behavior, and long-term brand equity (Oliver, 1997; Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, and Schlesinger, 1994). The current research argues that mentoring, conceptualized through the INFUSE Framework, represents a novel antecedent of satisfaction and dissatisfaction across stakeholders. Anchored by satisfaction, this study links mentoring practices to both employee well-being and consumer experiences. Employee satisfaction is closely linked to service quality and customer satisfaction (Heskett et al., 1994), and internal marketing research has reinforced this connection by demonstrating how employee satisfaction predicts loyalty outcomes across contexts (Dahl & Peltier, 2014).

The INFUSE Framework provides a structured yet flexible approach to mentoring, comparing the process of selecting mentors to consumer decision-making. Employees, like consumers, can seek, develop, and curate an evolving portfolio of mentors based on perceived value, accessibility, and relevance to their needs. By embedding mentoring into marketing strategy, organizations can generate employee satisfaction, reduce dissatisfaction, and influence consumer satisfaction and complaint resolution. In this way, mentoring becomes a structured input into the satisfaction-dissatisfaction-complaining behavior cycle.

THE INFUSE FRAMEWORK: A CONSTELLATION APPROACH TO MENTORING

The INFUSE Framework (Aron, 2024) introduces a "shopping cart" model for mentoring relationships, emphasizing the strategic selection of several mentors across six key dimensions. This approach aligns with growing interest in mentoring constellations and developmental networks.

Mentoring is crucial for career success, yet mentors can be hard to find, train, and sustain. The concept of having multiple mentors, rather than just one, is highly effective. Baugh and Scandura (1999) highlighted the benefits of a "developmental network" approach, finding that individuals with mentors from diverse backgrounds gained a broader range of perspectives and skills than those with a single mentor. Similarly, Shen, Cotton, and Kram (2015) explored the concept of protégé portfolios, wherein mentees cultivate relationships with several mentors, each offering expertise in specific areas. Their research suggests this approach leads to a more comprehensive understanding of complex challenges and fosters a broader professional network. Smith, Luetkemeyer, Wilson, Cheek, and Brewer (2023) further emphasize the value of mentor diversity, finding that mentees with mentors from different genders and ethnicities reported higher levels of career satisfaction and a stronger sense of belonging within their organizations.

Theoretical Foundations of the INFUSE Framework

A key source for the development of the INFUSE Framework comes from Montgomery (2017), who presented the "nodes" model of mentoring, emphasizing the importance of developmental relationships between mentors and protégés. The model highlights three core nodes: the protégé, the mentor, and the relationship itself. The INFUSE Framework builds on this by focusing on the nature of the mentoring relationships needed for a protégé's success, recognizing that one person may take on more than one role within the framework.

The array of relationships presented in the INFUSE Framework was also inspired by Eby's (1997) typology of mentoring relationships. Eby proposed categories based on skill development and relationship form, noting that mentors can be found outside traditional hierarchical structures. The INFUSE Framework similarly recognizes that valuable mentors can exist outside a mentee's firm, outside the organizational chart, and even outside their industry.

The Six Dimensions of the INFUSE Framework

The INFUSE Framework identifies six key mentor types that together form a comprehensive mentoring constellation:

Industry Membership (I). A mentor from the mentee's industry but not their firm, providing broader industry insights, market intelligence, and awareness of the competitive landscape. These mentors help employees understand industry trends, anticipate changes, and position themselves strategically within their field. By offering perspective beyond organizational boundaries, Industry mentors enhance employees' ability to innovate and adapt to market shifts.

Nearby Presence (N). A mentor who is physically or virtually accessible for real-time guidance and immediate problem-solving. Proximity enables timely feedback, contextual learning, and responsive support during critical moments. The accessibility of Nearby mentors creates psychological safety and reduces workplace anxiety, allowing employees to navigate challenges with greater confidence and resilience.

Firm Affiliation (F). An internal mentor who reinforces organizational alignment, culture, and institutional knowledge. These mentors help employees understand unwritten rules, organizational politics, and strategic priorities within the company. Firm mentors accelerate integration into corporate culture, enhance career trajectory within the organization, and promote more substantial organizational commitment.

Underrepresented Identity (U). Mentors supporting inclusivity, psychological safety, and authentic self-expression, particularly for employees from historically marginalized groups. These mentors provide guidance on navigating workplace challenges related to identity and foster a sense of belonging. Underrepresented mentors contribute to workplace equity, reduce turnover among diverse employees, and enhance organizational diversity climate.

Similar Roles (S). A peer mentor with comparable professional responsibilities, enhancing collaboration, shared learning, and technical skill development. Role similarity enables specific skill transfer, practical advice, and benchmarking against industry standards. These mentors offer practical strategies for role-specific challenges and create lateral networks that enhance career mobility and knowledge sharing.

Empathetic Support (E). Mentors provide emotional encouragement, psychological resilience, and holistic well-being support. These relationships focus on personal growth, work-life integration, and long-term career fulfillment. Empathetic mentors reduce burnout, enhance workplace engagement, and foster psychological capital that translates to improved customer interactions.

By diversifying mentoring relationships across these six dimensions, employees build a tailored support network that enhances professional growth and workplace satisfaction.

Mentoring as a Driver of Employee Satisfaction

The relationship between mentoring and employee satisfaction is well-established in organizational literature. Effective mentoring enhances employee engagement by fostering career development, organizational commitment, and workplace well-being (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, and Lima 2004). When employees receive support through structured mentoring relationships, they experience greater job satisfaction, reduced turnover intention, and increased organizational citizenship behaviors.

The INFUSE Framework amplifies the benefits of mentoring by enabling employees to customize their mentoring networks according to their specific needs and career stages. This personalized approach to professional development addresses diverse aspects of employee satisfaction, including:

Career Advancement. Multi-dimensional mentoring accelerates skill acquisition and career mobility.

Psychological Well-being. Diverse support networks reduce workplace isolation and stress.

Organizational Connection. Internal mentors strengthen cultural alignment and institutional belonging.

Professional Identity. Role-specific mentors reinforce competence and professional self-efficacy.

Work-Life Integration. Empathetic mentors support holistic approaches to career sustainability.

Conversely, malignant, missing, or mismatched mentoring can lead to dissatisfaction, manifest as workplace isolation, burnout or mental trauma, and disengagement (Eby, 1997). Such dissatisfaction not only undermines employee well-being but also weakens the service-profit chain (Heskett et al., 1994), creating conditions that can lead to consumer dissatisfaction and complaint behavior.

Employee Satisfaction as a Driver of Consumer Satisfaction

The link between employee satisfaction and consumer satisfaction is robustly supported in marketing literature. As Davidow (2012, p. 4) notes, "If we are looking at consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, then one of the critical antecedents would be employee satisfaction or dissatisfaction." The service-profit chain model (Heskett et al., 1994) posits that satisfied employees deliver superior customer experiences, leading to increased consumer satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability.

Jeon and Choi (2012) identify a unidirectional relationship in which employee satisfaction leads to customer satisfaction, but not vice versa, suggesting that organizational leadership must prioritize employee satisfaction initiatives. This finding echoes evidence from internal marketing research, which validates the link between employee satisfaction and loyalty across cultural contexts, including in the service-intensive setting of U.S. and German nurses (Dahl & Peltier, 2014). Together, these studies underscore the importance of mentoring as a strategic investment in consumer-facing outcomes. Smith (2021) reinforces this connection, noting that customers who experience positive customer service interactions feel higher levels of satisfaction with the service and more substantial commitment to the service provider. Loveman (1998) demonstrates that increasing employee satisfaction and retention directly increases customer retention, while Al Kurdi, Alshurideh, and Alnaser (2020) conclude that customer retention will not be evident until high degrees of employee satisfaction are achieved. It has also been established that dissatisfied employees contribute to reduced service quality and lower consumer satisfaction, outcomes that frequently manifest in complaint behavior (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996; Davidow, 2012; Oliver, 1997; Smith, 2021). This dual pathway underscores the importance of mentoring as both a generator of satisfaction and a safeguard against dissatisfaction-driven complaints.

Mechanisms Linking Employee Satisfaction to Consumer Satisfaction

Mentoring relationships, as experienced through the INFUSE Framework, influence key consumer satisfaction drivers through several specific mechanisms:

Service Quality. Employees with strong mentoring relationships demonstrate higher confidence and competence, leading to improved customer service (Yee, Yeung, and Cheng 2010). These improvements in service quality have well-documented behavioral consequences, including loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and reduced switching (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). Mentored employees are better equipped to handle complex customer interactions, solve problems efficiently, and personalize service experiences. On the other hand, employees who lack mentoring support are more likely to make errors, delay responses, and mishandle challenging encounters. These service failures heighten consumer dissatisfaction and increase the likelihood of complaints

(Yee, Yeung, and Cheng 2010; Davidow, 2012; see Naylor, 2024 for a review of the service quality construct in satisfaction research).

Brand Advocacy. Employees who receive mentorship are more likely to engage in brand-supporting behaviors, such as positive word-of-mouth and consumer relationship-building (Ragins, Cotton, and Miller 2000). Through internal branding reinforced by mentoring, employees shape brand perceptions and influence consumer trust (de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006). Employees lacking such developmental support may disengage, creating risks of negative word-of-mouth that contribute to consumer dissatisfaction and complaint escalation.

Customer Loyalty. Organizations with strong mentoring cultures tend to retain employees longer, ensuring consistency in customer experiences and fostering deeper consumer relationships (Oliver, 1980). Low turnover creates relationship continuity that consumers value and trust.

Problem-Solving Capacity. Mentored employees have access to broader institutional knowledge and support networks, enabling more effective resolution of customer concerns. This enhanced capability directly impacts consumer satisfaction following service recovery efforts.

Employee Engagement. Mentoring enhances emotional investment in work outcomes, creating authentic enthusiasm that customers perceive and respond to positively. Engaged employees are more likely to go beyond minimum requirements to create memorable customer experiences.

Future Research and Applications

To further develop the INFUSE Framework and establish its validity, several studies are proposed with multiple, related objectives:

Qualitative Validation Study. Interviews with professionals to determine which INFUSE Framework categories they utilize in their careers, providing an understanding of comparative populations and verifying the exhaustive nature of the six categories.

Satisfaction Correlation Study. Measuring protégé satisfaction across job, firm, and career dimensions to identify correlations between satisfaction levels and mentoring relationship types based on the INFUSE categories.

Performance Impact Study. Assessing job performance and employer/supervisor satisfaction against the mentoring experiences of employees to identify optimal mentoring constellations.

Consumer Satisfaction Connection Study. Measuring consumer satisfaction based on the mentoring relationships of service providers is especially relevant in service-based industries and in service elements of other industries. As Larsen and Wright (2020) suggest, customer satisfaction is, or should be, the ultimate goal of all marketing research.

Future research should also investigate dissatisfaction and complaint pathways. For example, studies could examine whether employees lacking access to one or more INFUSE mentor categories exhibit greater dissatisfaction and turnover. Parallel research could assess whether such organizational gaps increase consumer complaints, linking the absence of mentoring to the dissatisfaction–complaining behavior cycle. These studies would extend satisfaction theory by empirically connecting mentoring structures not only to positive outcomes but also to the antecedents of dissatisfaction and complaint behavior that remain underexplored.

As the proposed studies grow more complex, quantitative approaches such as correlational analysis or MANCOVA (Multivariate Analysis of Covariance) will be employed to account for multiple dependent variables while controlling for extraneous variables. These approaches will

examine the interplay between an employee's mentoring relationships, as described by the INFUSE Framework, and focal satisfaction levels among stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

This paper advances satisfaction theory by positioning mentoring, through the INFUSE Framework, as a dual antecedent of satisfaction and dissatisfaction across organizational stakeholders. Whereas traditional satisfaction models emphasize service quality and complaint behavior primarily from consumer perspectives, the INFUSE Framework reframes mentoring as both a generator of employee satisfaction and a buffer against dissatisfaction, which can lead to unhappy employees and complaint escalation. By embedding mentoring within the satisfaction–dissatisfaction–complaint cycle, the framework identifies a relational mechanism that connects employee experiences with consumer outcomes in ways previously underexplored.

The contribution is twofold. First, it extends theoretical work by incorporating mentoring structures into established satisfaction models, suggesting new pathways for empirical inquiry and methodological refinement. Second, it offers organizations a practical tool to strengthen service quality and brand advocacy while mitigating risks associated with employee disengagement and consumer complaints. In doing so, the INFUSE Framework not only advances academic discourse but also provides actionable guidance for managers seeking to link developmental relationships to sustainable marketplace advantage.

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