

THE EFFECT OF SIMPLIFYING THE COMPLAINT PROCESS: A FIELD EXPERIMENT WITH THE BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU

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ABSTRACT

The decision of whether or not to complain about a dissatisfying product or service has been thought to be dependent on the expectation of effort required to lodge the complaint. Previous studies relying on cross sectional survey methodology have shown relationships between effort and complaining to the manufacturer or retailer. This paper examines the relationship between the difficulty of complaining to a third party and subsequent opinions of the complaint process. Taking advantage of a unique opportunity, Better Business Bureau complainants were assigned randomly to either a current, complicated, process or a simplified process as part of a field experiment. Records were kept of the proportions of complaint forms and surveys returned and complainants' evaluations of the processes. Those consumers in the simplified condition returned more than twice the proportion of complaint forms as did those in the current condition. When surveyed, consumers rated the simplified process more positively, even if they were no more satisfied with the outcome (compensation) from the complaint.

BACKGROUND

The research stream in consumer complaining behavior (CCB) has consisted primarily of surveys and reports of a retrospective nature, in which consumers are self-reporting past behaviors and incidents (Bearden and Teel 1983). Consumer self reports have increased our knowledge and understanding of the factors which influence the CCB process, including the impact of demographics, consumer's personality and attitudes toward complaining, and the perceived likelihood of success (Blodgett, Granbois and Walters 1993; Day 1984; Landon 1977; Richins 1982). The majority of this research has been based on experiences in the United States, rather than enlisting a more cross-cultural approach (Liu, Watkins and Yi 1997). The dominant capitalist culture in the U.S. may be viewed as consistent

with the style of decision making that is often associated with CCB. That is, the consumer is often viewed as deciding how to respond based on, "What's in it for me?"

Significant research efforts in CCB have focused on the expected consumer outcomes. Expected outcomes (benefits) may include financial remuneration, replacement, apology, or improved future service. Several studies have found perceived likelihood of success (Day and Landon 1976; Richins 1983, 1987; and Singh 1990) and product importance (Richins 1985) to be related positively to complaining behavior.

Weighed against the benefits that accrue from complaining are the costs incurred in the process. While this relationship has been discussed for decades (e.g., East 1996, Landon 1977), theory and evidence have been inconsistent. Richins (1979) cited costs as including travel, time, interpersonal factors, paperwork, social embarrassment and other inconveniences. Others have included image of the complaine, complainer's experience, and required time (Prakash 1991), number of required contacts for resolution (Davidow and Leigh 1998), and the presence or absence of knowledge, skill and other resources, or control factors (East 1996) in assessing expected cost. For a satisfactory resolution, "The complaint communication process must be easy and clear for consumers, and the company representatives must be considerate and helpful (Davidow and Leigh 1998, p. 93).

While a significant body of CS/D research has explored the determinants of complaining behavior and the factors influencing the complaint process, little attention has been directed to the process firms utilize (Goodwin and Ross 1989) or the process utilized by third parties to respond to consumer complaints. This is particularly important because, as suggested by Etzel and Silverman (1981), "secondary satisfaction" arising from complaint handling may assist in building even stronger brand loyalties than satisfaction with the initial service.

Complaint satisfaction may be particularly salient when created in a dyadic situation as part of

an interactive complaint communication (ICC), as discussed by Garrett, Meyers and Camey (1991). Perception of the outcomes of the complaint process is dependent, in part, on how the consumer feels she/he was treated by the organization's complaint handler. Having someone listen, even more so than receiving compensation, may be responsible for the consumer's perception of having participated in an equitable process.

The equity literature discusses two types of fairness: distributional fairness, and procedural fairness. Distributional fairness is concerned with the manner in which resources are distributed and the principles used for allocation (Adams 1965, Goodwin and Ross 1989). In contrast, procedural fairness is based on the process by which conflicts about allocation of resources are handled. Procedural, or process, fairness may also be applied to the complaint handling process as shown by Goodwin and Ross (1989), who used recall of past service failures to analyze and code open-ended responses to the question, "Was this resolution fair or not, and why?". Their study of the complaint handling process found that the strongest influences on overall satisfaction, and willingness to return to the firm, were compensation and interaction style. These same two factors, compensation and interaction style, along with a third factor, responsiveness, were significantly correlated with the perceived fairness of the complaint handling process.

A related concept, perceived justice, extends the process by connecting the complaint event to future repatronage (Blodgett 1994). Although this was derived in a retailer context, consumers who complain to third party agencies may use a similar calculus to determine whether to repatronize these agencies.

THIRD PARTY COMPLAINING

This study is concerned primarily with determining whether the third party complaint handling process has an impact on consumer perceptions of satisfaction. As noted by Bearden and Oliver, "Because creating satisfied complainants is a primary goal of complaint handling systems, and because satisfaction with complaint resolution is a dependent variable of

research interest to both consumer affairs practitioners and marketers, the relation between the nature of complaint behavior and satisfaction with problem resolution appears to warrant further investigation," (1985, p. 223).

Complaining to a third party was separated from other complaint behavior due to its infrequent use and unusual nature. Third party complaining has been identified as the behavior least likely to be selected by dissatisfied consumers (Hogarth and English 1997; Liu, Watkins and Yi 1997; Prakash 1991). This option requires more effort (Prakash 1991) and includes contacting public vehicles (e.g., newspapers and local television news) and taking legal action as well as contacting complaint resolution agencies such as industry boards or the local Better Business Bureau chapter (Liu, Watkins and Yi 1997).

Prakash (1991) hypothesized that it is the expectation of this additional effort that mediates the relationship between intensity of dissatisfaction and likelihood of engaging in complaining behavior (in this case, to a third party). For this reason, third party complaining may be viewed as particularly susceptible to cost-benefit tradeoffs. This is one explanation of why consumers who engage in this behavior tend to be younger, better-educated and from higher income groups (Hogarth and English 1997), in addition to the general tendency for complainers to more likely be female.

Third party complainants may be contacting any of a number of private, governmental or quasi-governmental agencies. These may include consumer advocacy groups, government consumer agencies (e.g., Consumer Product Safety Commission), federal, state or local attorneys general and trade associations. The Federal Reserve Board (of the United States), for example, accepts and responds to consumer complaints (Hogarth and English 1997) - but only when the consumer is savvy enough to know whom to contact and how.

Most consumers will cite the Better Business Bureau (BBB) as one of a short list of possible agencies to contact (Fisher, Garrett and Arnold 1997). While the BBB enjoys this strong name recognition, detailed knowledge of its structure and activities is less widely held. Many consumers, for example, are unaware that the BBB is private and has no regulatory or criminal prosecution

authority.

BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU

This study was conducted with the cooperation of a regional Better Business Bureau that was interested in obtaining additional insight into the complaint resolution process, with a stated goal of improving service to its customers. In the case of the BBB, "customers" include both local residents (consumers) and businesses. While the role played on behalf of consumers is well known, it is less well known that the BBB is supported by dues paid by member businesses. It is this dual role of serving the needs of both the business community and individual consumers, that makes the BBB unique as a third party consumer group.

The researchers interviewed key members of the BBB management team, to determine the current process used to handle incoming complaints. The current process began with an initial telephone intake process, initiated by the dissatisfied consumer. During this initial telephone contact, basic consumer information was taken, including the nature of the problem, and consumer contact information (e.g. address and telephone number). Subsequently, the consumer was mailed a form, which she/he was required to complete and sign, and attach necessary documentation to substantiate the complaint. The complete complaint package had to be returned before the BBB would look into the actual complaint or discuss the situation in more detail.

This "old" process placed much of the burden on the consumer, appeared to discourage complainants from venting their frustrations, and did not appear to be immediately responsive to the needs of the complainant. At about the time the research project began, the BBB had received notice of a new system of handling consumer complaints that recently had been adopted by several BBB chapters across the U.S. Software had been developed that enabled the intake operator to classify the call (business category and nature of complaint) and immediately interview the caller to obtain and record the relevant details of the complaint. The new system would likely require more phone time for BBB operators, and therefore have a direct impact on cost per call. However, the procedure had the potential for

documenting the majority of the complainants' problems directly into a computer system during the initial intake telephone call. This would significantly reduce the paperwork burden on the complainant, while allowing him/her to vent their problem at the time of their first contact.

Following the intake call, the complainant would be mailed a copy of the computer print-out detailing the problem as it had been explained to the BBB operator, and given an opportunity to amend the complaint, attach any helpful documentation (e.g., receipts), sign the form, and return it to the BBB. As under the "old" system, the complaint investigation process actually would not begin until the computer printout had been signed and returned to the BBB office.

In summary, the old system required more effort from the consumer in order to complete a blank form. Under the new system, consumers would be presented with a draft of their complaint that may require no more than a signature and return postage (or FAX). With both systems, consumers are asked to attach documentation. However, the old system appeared to demand this, "Also be sure to enclose photocopies of contracts, receipts, cancelled checks or other relevant documents" (instruction on BBB form). The new system presents this request in a manner that permits including documentation as an option. Printed on the transcription is the statement, "Also attach any documents that support your position." The elimination of a photocopying errand may permit faster response or enable a response from consumers who otherwise may have failed to return the old form.

In virtually all of the prior investigations of the effect of required effort on likelihood of complaining, cross sectional survey methodology was used to compare the complaint rate across levels of perceived effort. The availability of old (effortful) and new (simpler) complaining processes presented a unique opportunity to conduct a field experiment. The manipulation of complaint method difficulty and subsequent evaluation of consumer satisfaction, perception of fairness, willingness to reuse the BBB (i.e., "repurchase the complaint service) and ultimate resolution of the complaint are the contributions unique to this paper.

From a practical standpoint, the BBB

management team wanted to adopt this new system only if it provided better service to their customers. The experimental design provided the ability to evaluate the new system objectively prior to full-scale implementation.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected over a three-month period, during the first three months of 1999. A subset of five BBB operators was trained on the new system. The operators were given a training period during which data were not collected, until they felt comfortable with the new computer phone intake system. To reduce the chance of bias, operators were assigned to work either under the "old" or the "new" system for an eight-hour shift, and then rotated to the opposite system on the next shift. Taking advantage of the random nature of incoming calls, and the centralized phone system, complainants were randomly assigned to one of the five intake operators, and thus had an equal chance of participating under the old system or the new system. All complainants are assigned a code number upon being entered into the system, which would allow for tracking of the questionnaire responses.

After the three-month study period was completed, a two page double-sided questionnaire was sent to each subject to collect data on complainants' perceptions of the seriousness of the problem and factors relating to satisfaction with the process. Respondents were asked to evaluate the phone intake, the form mailed to the complainant's home, the outcome/resolution, and the overall satisfaction with the complaint process. In addition, brief demographic data including income, age, education and occupation also were collected.

Questionnaire

Obviously, satisfaction with the complaint process will be influenced by a number of factors, hence the questionnaire solicited subjects' response to a number of the salient dimensions of the overall complaint handling process. With the exception of "overall experience", each of the satisfaction factors used a composite measure, to increase reliability of the measurement instrument

(Churchill 1979). The satisfaction factor measures used were *perceptions of the initial phone contact* (6 items), *perceptions of the forms sent to me in the mail* (7 items), *overall satisfaction with problem resolution* (7 items), and the *overall experience* (1 item). Responses to each of the items in the composite measures were evaluated on a seven point Likert-type scale, ranging from -3 to +3, while measurement for overall experience was evaluated on a seven point bi-polar semantic differential scale anchored with Terrible and Delighted as shown below: (Westbrook and Oliver 1981).

1. Overall how do you feel about this experience with the BBB ?

Terrible	Unhappy	Mostly Mixed	Mostly Pleased	Delighted	Dissatisfied	Satisfied
(-3)	(-2)	(-1)	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)

Each of the composite groupings was validated using orthogonal, varimax factor analysis, in which all factors loaded as intended (with factor loadings between .56 and .94).

In addition to these satisfaction factors, the questionnaire included several qualifying questions to assure that the household had, indeed, registered a complaint to the BBB and that the person filling out the questionnaire was indeed the person registering the complaint. A section was also included to measure the overall importance of the product, as past research has shown that expected outcomes of complaints are dependent on the importance of the product purchased (Richins 1985). A number of demographic dimensions were captured from the survey instrument, including age, sex, income and occupation (Table 1).

A total of 500 questionnaires were mailed out, with 10 returned due to address problems and a total of 134 useable responses for an overall response rate of 27%. Unlike some other surveys of complainants, not enough data were available on non-respondents to check for bias (Hogarth and English 1997). The response rate is very good, however, for a mail survey that included no incentive.

Respondent Groups

In addition to non-response bias, it is helpful to look for potential bias between groups that

TABLE 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents
Full Sample and by Type of Questionnaire

	All Respondents	Questionnaire 1 Old Process	Questionnaire 2 New Process
Sample Size	n=134	n= 56 (41.8%)	n=78 (58.2%)
Gender			
Female	86 (64.7%)	38 (67.9%)	49 (62.8%)
Male	47 (35.3%)	18 (32.1%)	29 (37.2%)
Income	\$41,188	\$40,155	\$41,505
Age		49.53 years	46.34 years
Education			
Less than High School	6 (34.6%)	3 (5.4%)	3 (4%)
High School Graduate	66 (50.8%)	33 (58.9%)	33 (44%)
College Graduate	45 (34.6%)	16 (28.6%)	30 (40%)
Advanced or Professional Degree	13 (10.0%)	4 (7.1%)	9 (12%)
Occupation			
Blue Collar (Tradesman/Laborer)	25 (19.3%)	13 (24.1%)	12 (15.6%)
White Collar (Clerical/Administrative)	22 (16.9%)	9 (16.7%)	13 (16.9%)
Management/Professional	33 (25.4%)	8 (14.8%)	26 (33.8%)
Retired	20 (15.4%)	8 (14.8%)	12 (15.6%)
Homemaker	19 (14.6%)	10 (18.5%)	9 (11.7%)
Other (Unemployed / Self Student etc.)	11 (8.5%)	6 (11.1%)	5 (6.5%)

would inject non-sampling bias into the results if subjects from one group (e.g., old) differed from subjects in the other group (e.g., new) on a dimension related to complaining behavior. Random assignment of subjects to treatment conditions (new versus old) appears to have been successful. There are no significant differences between subjects in the "old" group compared to subjects in the "new" group (Table 1). Women were a greater proportion of the complainant sample than might have been expected based on population norms, but consistent with findings in prior complaining studies. Based on research by Garrett, Meyers and West (1997) this is not expected to affect either the response to the old process or the new process. Other demographic variables were consistent with the slight biases seen in previous research (e.g., higher education, income).

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment conditions, new versus old process, with 250 subjects in each condition, and therefore 250 questionnaires mailed out to each group. There were 56 useable questionnaires returned from the subjects in the *Old Process* treatment condition for a response rates of 22.4%, and 78 valid questionnaires returned from subjects in the *New Process* treatment condition, for a response rate of 31.6%. This difference in response rates is meaningful and will be discussed below.

Differences in perception of product importance could account for differences in complaining and differences in responses to complaint handling. There was no significant difference in overall product performance (rated on a 1 to 7 scale) between the old process group (mean = 4.5) and the new process group (mean = 4.6; $p = .49$). Overall, the respondents rated

TABLE 2
Comparison of Satisfaction Factors
Composite Variables

Composite Variable	Variables in Composite	Mean		t-statistic	p-value
		Old Process	New Process		
Initial Phone Contact	6	1.76	2.05	-1.67	** .05
Forms Received in Mail	7	1.46	1.64	-1.04	.15
Resolution of Problem	7	.18	.57	-1.20	.11
Overall Experience	1	4.76	4.91	-.45	.33

KEY:

** Significant at the .05 level

their problems as somewhat inconvenient (mean = 5.52) and serious (mean = 5.4), and a bit expensive (mean = 4.93). However, on average the problems were not perceived to be dangerous (mean = 2.55).

RESULTS

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate, in an experimental setting, the impact of a new complaint handling process on complainant satisfaction. From a practical standpoint, the BBB was interested in how many consumers complete the entire complaint cycle. This entails contacting the Bureau by telephone, receiving a form (of one sort or another) in the mail and then returning that form to be processed. The local chapter of the BBB previously had tracked return rate as a performance measure, using the old process, and typically recorded 20% of complainers following through. During the test period, the old form performed consistently with this, at 22% returns. The new form, by contrast, saw a 48% return rate.

The survey was sent to those who had returned these initial forms to record their opinions. The t-test analysis between the two experimental treatment groups (new versus old) was done at the composite level, for each of the four factors of satisfaction (Table 2). As shown in Table 2, the mean satisfaction was directionally higher in all

cases for the *New Process* compared to the *Old Process*.

Of particular interest, the mean satisfaction (on a -3 to +3 scale) for the Initial Telephone Contact phase was 1.76 for the old process compared to a mean of 2.05 for the new process ($p = -1.67$) which was statistically significant at the .05 level. This was most likely due to the considerably longer phone time under the new system, which provided complainants with more time to describe their problem to the third party, and to vent their concerns. So even though more time was required, respondents using the new process felt their time was used more efficiently (mean = 1.8) than those under the old process (mean = 1.5). This was due, perhaps, to the perceptions that the new process allowed the consumer to better "state everything I needed to over the telephone" (new = 2.1; old = 1.8) and to "better communicate my concerns over the telephone" (new = 2.0; old = 1.6). The response was also viewed as more clear (new = 2.1; old = 1.8), but no more accurate in either condition (mean = 1.8). Both groups found the Bureau personnel to be equally courteous (mean = 2.3), which would be expected given the cross training and random assignment of personnel. These findings are consistent with other studies (1994, Goodwin and Ross 1989) which found that an opportunity to "present one's case" in a complaint scenario influences consumer

perceptions and satisfaction with the process.

While the other two composite measures were directionally correct, they failed to reach statistical significance. It is interesting to note that the composite variable "*satisfaction with forms received in mail*" had an average of 1.46 for the old process, and an average of 1.64 for the new process. The new system, in which the form received was the respondent's own complaint already typed, allowed for immediate feedback to the complainant and created more positive perceptions. This is consistent with past research findings that found that response speed (Gilly 1987) was a significant driver of customer satisfaction with the complaint handling process, in a business context. It is reasonable to extend this concept to the complaint handling process of a third party, such as a consumer agency or BBB.

None of the individual scales comprising the evaluation of the form reached statistical significance, but each showed directional preference for the new form. The greatest differences were seen in the "ability to provide all the documents the form asked for" (mean = 1.59; new = 1.75; old = 1.39); "the form was difficult to complete" (reverse scaled for consistency, resulting in a mean = 1.52; new = 1.64; old = 1.35); and "completing the form was an efficient use of my time" (mean = 1.09; new = 1.26; old = 0.87). Of all of these subscales, the highest rated was "I understood the form that was sent to me" (mean = 2.1); followed by "form provided the opportunity to present my side fairly (mean = 1.76); then "form included all useful information (mean = 1.59) and lastly, " given the chance, I would use this form again (mean = 1.31). All scale differences were in the expected direction (preference for the new), with the exception of "included all useful information" which was rated with equal scores by both groups.

Overall satisfaction with the problem resolution averaged .18 for the old process, and a directionally, though not statistically significant higher .57 for the new process. As previously discussed this may be related to the new system's ability to allow the complainants to vent their frustrations and give detailed information on their first contact, and the greater speed and efficiency of the new, revised system.

The complainants' net gain did not seem to be

much of an issue. "I was satisfied with the final outcome to my problem" rated lowest of the scales (mean = -0.66), with no significant difference between groups. Yet, respondents would "contact the BBB again if I had another problem" (mean = 1.3) or "recommend the BBB to friends who had a similar problem (mean = 1.21). Opinions were not strong as to the extent to which "the resolution was fair to me" (mean = -0.26) or even with whether "I was satisfied with the time frame it took to resolve my problem" (mean = 0.17). In each of these cases, the respondents who had been involved with the new process had more positive responses, but not significantly. The only scale that showed statistically significant differences was "the problem was handled thoroughly" (mean = -0.01; new = 0.31; old = -0.46).

On the final rating scale (Terrible = 1...Delighted = 7), the overall experience was rated only slightly higher (4.91) for the new process, than for the old process (4.76) although both scores were in the range anchored at "mostly satisfied." This suggests that the old system was not bad in any sense, but had some aspects that were possible to improve.

Although the survey was crafted based on prior BBB studies, prior CS/D studies and in consultation with BBB staff, it is possible that factors affecting complainants' satisfaction would be overlooked. For this reason, an open-ended, "if there is anything else" question was included. The comments ranged from very positive to very negative for each process. These comments were used as exploratory information only, but it is interesting to examine some of the variation achieved:

Old form:

I was dissatisfied with my experience with the BBB, because I was asked in their form to identify the problem, as well as provide detailed documentation and to state what I believed would be a satisfactory resolution to my problem. After investing several more hours of my valuable time in doing so...the company's resolution to the problem was nowhere near what I requested and felt fair

The company that I complained about did not respond to the BBB, but at least it was a last resort on my part to get their attention

Waste of my time...forms were too numerous for the problem I have

New form:

The gal that helped me was very nice

The form received in the mail had the incident all wrong. When I wrote everything again and sent it back I got a letter back stating that basically this wasn't worth putting on record

The information gathered by the BBB was incomplete and vague. Probably should let consumer fill in all details. I had to type a letter giving the chronological order of events

DISCUSSION

Perhaps the best single indicator of the response to simplifying the complaint process was the increase in percentage of forms returned. The new process more than doubled the return rate, far exceeding expectations. While extending the length of the intake interview and increasing the number of responses adds costs, BBB management noted that these additional costs can be justified, as they are consistent with organizational goals. The new system allows consumers more opportunity to directly communicate their concerns to trained BBB intake staff, while generating a higher percentage of completed cases, and thus an overall improvement in the level of service delivery. Fortunately the BBB organization was able to absorb this increased work load without increasing staffing levels, and therefore without an associated increase in costs. Cost is an important factor for any organization, but particularly for non profit organizations who must continually balance the costs of increased service with the benefits provided.

Consumers seemed to appreciate the efficiency of the new process and the reduced effort required. These factors were rated more positively in the survey that was administered. New process complainants also returned a greater proportion of the surveys that were initially sent -- perhaps suggesting a higher overall satisfaction with the BBB. The new process can be more convenient in timing for the complainants (consumers make the calls and the mailed forms may require few changes). The problems are important enough to

generate dissatisfaction and complaining among consumers, but may not be worth their additional time and effort.

Consistent with prior work, the process of complaining, and of having one's complaints heard, is important in determining the complainant's final satisfaction (Bernacchi, Kono and Smith 1979). A third party agency may have limited ability to affect compensation outcomes, but can provide a cathartic, satisfying interaction through which to air grievances. The process can be enough to encourage complainants to return when further problems occur (Hogarth and English 1997).

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