

CUSTOMER PERCEPTION OF QUALITY OF SERVICE AND RESPONSE TO THE COMPLAINT-HANDLING PROCESS OF A RENTAL CAR COMPANY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate the level of satisfaction with the complaint-handling process of a major rental car corporation. The study focused on two concepts: customer perception of service quality and customer response to the complaint-handling process. Scores on the SERVQUAL instrument measured customer perception of quality of service, while patronage and word-of-mouth items measured customer response. Comparisons were made on the basis of gender and type of complaint. A telephone survey was chosen as the means of data collection. The population for this study consisted of 2,135 customers with complaints resolved three months prior to the study. Of this number, 466 yielded usable surveys. Significant differences in quality of service by gender and type of complaint were determined by t-tests. Significant differences in patronage and word-of-mouth by gender and type of complaint were determined by Chi-square tests. Analysis revealed no significant difference in perception of quality of service by gender and in response to complaint handling by gender or type of complaint. A significant difference was found in perception of quality of service by type of complaint. Additional Chi-square analyses revealed relationships between customer satisfaction with action taken and the variables, patronage and word-of-mouth.

INTRODUCTION

As the U.S. continues to move from a manufacturing to a service economy, the need for improved customer service is critical. Estimates reveal that services now comprise approximately 75% of the Gross National Product (Heinzerling, Hook, & Metzen, 1990; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990) and account for nearly 9 out of 10 new jobs created by the economy (Zeithaml et al, 1990). With the increasing empowerment of the consumer and increased economic levels of certain groups within the economy, expectations

for customer service are rising. Product proliferation has exacerbated this issue by giving consumers more choices with different criteria for evaluating companies, and by increasing competition among companies. American business is being forced to respond by addressing the issues of customer satisfaction and customer perception of quality of service.

Hanna (1989) stated, "One mechanism adopted by some corporations to promote profits and/or consumer satisfaction is the corporate consumer affairs office" (p. 12). It is assumed that enhancing customer satisfaction will have the dual effect of improving customer loyalty and thereby company profits. The consumer affairs departments in American business are charged with this responsibility.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study was concerned with the handling, resolution, and analysis of customer complaints by a major rental car company and the subsequent consumer reaction to service rendered during the complaint process. The problem lay in isolating and then evaluating the determinants of customer satisfaction as they specifically related to service and even more specifically to corporate handling of customer complaints. Such an assessment could benefit the consumer in that problem areas or weaknesses could be identified by the business and corrected. Successful satisfaction of customer needs could presumably lead to repeat business or re-patronage and to favorable word-of-mouth communications.

A rental car company was chosen for this research since the industry deals with a large volume of customer complaints and has a high rate of complaint resolution, 72.6% (Council of Better Business Bureaus, 1989).

The company selected for this research has only relatively recently taken on a corporate format (1985) and has a growing global presence. The primary contributions of this study are the national sample from which it was drawn and the

focus on rental car companies, notorious for customer problems.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The major premise for perceived quality of service was derived from the conceptual framework set forth by Zeithaml et al. (1990).

Their definition of perception of quality of service included ten dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, credibility, security, access, communications, and understanding the customer. These were narrowed empirically to include tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy in the development of the SERVQUAL instrument.

The concept of customer response to complaint handling was adapted from the instrument used by Martin (1985). It focused on the reaction of the customer toward the company in terms of patronage and word-of-mouth communication after resolution of their complaint.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality of service has been difficult to measure (Armstrong & Symonds, 1991; Kotler & Bloom, 1984), probably due to the intangible quality of the purchasing experience. In fact, consumers have reported general satisfaction when purchasing goods, but were much less satisfied when it came to services (Zemke & Schaaf, 1989). There is a general feeling that service in the U.S. is poor and may be getting worse (Albrecht, 1988; Davidow & Uttal, 1989; Dubinsky, 1994; Innis & LaLonde, 1994; Marley, 1994; The American Salesman, 1994; Zemke & Schaaf, 1989). Several explanations are offered for poor service, including, a more sophisticated and demanding consumer, workers who consider service work beneath them, and a change in American demographics resulting in fewer entry-level workers. Companies may bear the brunt of poor service through reduced sales and diminished customer loyalty (Zemke & Schaaf, 1989).

In response to this concern over U.S. service quality, corporate consumer affairs offices are one resolution adopted by business to maximize profits and improve customer satisfaction (Fornell & Westbrook, 1984; Hanna, 1989). Goldsmith and

Vogel (1990) reported that membership in The Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business (SOCAP) has steadily increased since it began in 1973, reflecting business' growing interest in consumer affairs. Hanna (1989) contends that companies with good procedures for handling complaints do relatively well in their industries.

Complaint Handling

Making a complaint to the seller or to a third party was one of three potential responses to customer dissatisfaction outlined by Richins (1983). Through the socialization process, people have come to expect restitution for wrongs done to them. This has carried over into the marketplace, and consumers expect "an apology, a tangible response, and an empathetic contact person" (Goodwin & Ross, 1990).

Customer Perception of Quality of Service

A number of researchers view quality to be an overall evaluation of a product or service, similar to attitude. (Holbrook & Corfman, 1985; Olshavsky, 1985; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). The evaluation of service relies solely on the customer's level of satisfaction and is made more difficult since the sale, production and consumption of a service takes place simultaneously. Zeithaml (1988) found perception of service quality to be a function of the 10 overlapping dimensions mentioned in the conceptual framework.

Customer Gender

There is some suggestion that complaining behavior may be affected by gender (Martin, 1985). Mayer (1983), in a study of husband-wife coping differences with product malfunctions, found that males and females coped differently even within the same household and suggested that data gathered from the members of one gender are not generalizable to those of the other gender.

Type of Complaint

The Technical Assistance Research Program

(TARP, 1986) found product/service quality and billing disputes the most common types of consumer problems handled by business consumer affairs departments. The most common complaints against car rental companies were found to relate to overcharging (billing errors), having no cars available (reservation errors), insurance coverage complaints, and complaints regarding the condition of the vehicle (Dorfman, 1980; Gilson, 1981).

CUSTOMER RESPONSE TO COMPLAINT HANDLING

Hirschman (1970) suggested three responses to dissatisfaction: exit, voice, or loyalty. Richins (1983) detailed three similar responses: switching brands (patronage), making a complaint to the seller or third party, and telling others about the experience (word-of-mouth). Day (1984) reported that consumers were much more likely to stop buying a product and complain to their friends than they were to voice a complaint to the seller or to a third party. Other researchers have found similar results (Landon, 1977; Singh, 1991).

Patronage

The purpose for successful complaint resolution lies in maintaining brand loyalty. TARP (1979) showed that the strongest continued brand-loyal consumers were those whose complaints had been successfully handled. Non-complainers who were dissatisfied were the most likely to change brands. Other researchers showed similar results across industry types (Lewis, 1983; Gilly, 1987; Kraft, 1977).

Word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth (WOM) or telling others about a purchasing encounter is one response consumers may choose following a marketplace experience. In one instance, WOM was found to be even more influential than mass marketing or advertising (TARP, 1980). A strong relationship between complainant satisfaction and WOM has been found to exist. Arndt (1967) supported this finding and added that negative WOM had a stronger effect on purchase decisions than did positive WOM recommendations. Richins (1983) found that, as

the severity of the problem increased, the tendency to engage in negative WOM also increased. In addition, retailer responsiveness was also found to be a factor. If responsiveness to dissatisfaction was poor, customers were more likely to spread negative WOM and not complain.

Perceived Justice

A number of researchers have stressed the importance of the concept of perceived justice to the complaint process (Hirschman, 1970; Richins, 1987; Singh, 1990). Blodgett et al. (1993) suggest that perceived justice is a "major determinant of complainants repatronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth behavior". These findings have been borne out by other researchers as well (Gilly, 1987; Goodwin & Ross, 1989; Tax and Chandrashekar, 1992). According to this theory, once a consumer decides to complain, responses (repatronage and WOM) are dependent upon their perception of justice or fairness of the redress offered during the complaint process.

Blodgett et al. (1993) believe perceived justice is interrelated with several other concepts: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice. When applying these notions to complaint behavior, distributive justice relates to the perceived fairness of the response offered by the retailer or service provider. Procedural justice relates to the perceived fairness of complaint policies, while interactional justice relates to the manner in which the retailer or service provider responded to the complaint.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

A telephone survey was chosen as the means of collecting data for this research. Calls were made from the Customer Relations Department of the rental car company. After-hours calling was initiated since it was assumed that many consumers who had filed complaints would be working during business hours. The phone calls were follow-up calls to customers who had their complaints resolved three months prior to the onset of the study. The population consisted of 2,135 complaints which had been resolved and closed

according to company records. The questionnaire dealt with the level of satisfaction derived from the complaint process and how the customers responded to the company following the resolution of their complaint.

Population and Sample

Complaints to this company are handled by the Customer Relations Department of this company and customers can access this department by writing a letter of complaint or by calling the 1-800 number specifically designated for this purpose. In addition to handling complaints, this department handles questions, comments, requests, and suggestions from the public. The company receives many thousands of calls to its 1-800 customer service number each month.

This study utilized a national sample drawn from customers who had complained to the rental car company three months prior to the study. A systematic quota sample with a random start taken from four designated customer groups provided the format for sample selection. The company had identified these four areas of complaint origination to be included in the study: Franchise Group, Corporate Locations, 1-800 Inbound, and International. An attempt was made to equalize the number of respondents in each of these four groups to ensure a cross-section of their customer base. Descriptive statistical results according to these groups were analyzed for the corporation.

The Customer Relations Department provided detailed and completed records of 2,135 resolved complaints. Only 5.6% of respondents refused participation in the study. More problematic was the number of respondents who were unable to be reached because they either were not at home or had changed phone numbers. Consequently, three call-backs were made to each complainant before eliminating them from the sample. Calls were made at various times during the day and evening in an attempt to reach customers who were not at home. The final sample consisted of 466 usable surveys: 115 from the Franchise Group, 118 from Corporate Locations, 116 from 1-800 Inbound, and 117 from the International Group. This resulted in a 22% response rate. Although this data was analyzed in groups for the corporation, they were combined and analyzed as a whole for the present

study. Eight complaint categories were represented: accounting; coverage; mileage, articles and gas; qualifying; rates; reservations; service; and vehicles. These were designated by the company and consisted of the groupings by which customer service representatives categorized in-coming complaints.

Definitions

The following definitions related to the study:

Accounting Complaint--Complaint to the car rental company regarding the accounting procedures of the company, such as: overcharging, double billing, calculation errors, deposit not refunded, etc.

Coverage Complaint--Complaint regarding insurance coverage on a rented vehicle, such as: charged, but did not want, damages, theft, etc.

Mileage, Articles or Gas Complaint--Complaint regarding the amount charged per mile, the number of miles driven, price per gallon of gas, lost articles and/or damaged articles.

Qualifying Complaint--Complaint regarding qualifications for renting, such as: age minimum or maximum for renting a vehicle, local rental policies, drivers license requirement or cash rentals.

Rate Complaint--Complaint regarding rate disputes, such as: reservation center errors, travel agent errors, promotional rates, one-way fees, unauthorized drops, advertised rates, government rates, corporate rates, reserved rates not honored, etc.

Reservation Complaint--Complaint regarding reservation errors, such as: no record of reservation, no car available, etc.

Service Complaint--Complaint regarding behavior of employees, such as: slow service, hours of operation, etc.

Vehicle Complaint--Complaint regarding condition of the vehicle, such as: dirty vehicle, high mileage on rented vehicle, improper vehicle registration, etc.

Examination of Hypotheses

Six hypotheses were tested in the present study. Null hypotheses were evaluated on the basis of statistical analysis. A significance level of

.01 was the established level for rejection of null hypotheses. Table 1 contains the results of hypotheses testing.

Table 1
Summary of Null Hypotheses Testing

<u>Null Hypothesis</u>	<u>Results</u>
Concept 1: Customer perception of quality of service	
HO1: perception of quality of service by gender	Not Rejected
HO2: perception of quality of service by type of complaint	Rejected
Concept 2: Customer response to complaint handling	
HO3: patronage by gender	Not Rejected
HO4: patronage by type of complaint	Not Rejected
HO5: word-of-mouth by gender	Not Rejected
HO6: word-of-mouth by type of complaint	Not Rejected

Instrumentation

A combination of two instruments was chosen to collect the data. The first portion of the questionnaire dealt with customer response or reaction to the complaint resolution process. This was an adaptation of the questionnaire utilized by Martin (1985). Most of the questions in this section were in Likert-type format, although several open-ended questions were included. These unstructured responses were of particular interest to the rental car company. This portion measured satisfaction with response, promptness in gaining a response, courtesy of personnel, and feelings toward the company. In addition, patronage and WOM were measured. Information on gender and type of complaint were secured from company records.

The second portion of the study, a subset of the SERVQUAL instrument devised by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) was also in Likert-style format. Measured were five distinct dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The segment of the instrument selected for this study included the

portion which dealt specifically with evaluation of service received during complaint resolution and was analyzed as an additive score. The SERVQUAL instrument has been shown to have trait and content validity as well as total-scale reliability (Zeithaml, et al., 1988).

Treatment of the Data

The data collected by the telephone questionnaire were coded for the BMDP statistical program. Significant differences in perception of quality of service by gender and type of complaint were determined by *t*-tests. Significant differences in patronage and WOM by gender and type of complaint were determined by Chi-square goodness of fit tests. The relationships between satisfaction level and type of complaint, patronage, and WOM were determined by Chi-square goodness of fit tests. The variable satisfaction was measured against the dependent variables, patronage and WOM.

RESULTS

Description of Sample

The final sample for this study consisted of 466 usable surveys from four customer groups: 115 Franchises, 118 Corporate Locations, 116 1-800 Inbound, and 117 International. Of this sample, 62.5% were male ($n = 292$) and 37.5% were female ($n = 174$). Eight complaint categories were represented. Table 2 shows types of complaints.

Table 2
Type of Complaint

<u>Type of Complaint</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Accounting	251	54.0
Coverage	16	3.4
Mileage, Articles, & Gas	25	5.3
Qualifying	5	1.1
Rates	93	19.9
Reservations	23	5.0
Service	27	5.7
Vehicle	26	5.6

Satisfaction With Action Taken

Of the respondents, 16.9% (n=79) were fairly satisfied, 21% (n=98) were satisfied, and 40% (n=187) were very satisfied with corporate action taken on their complaint. This totaled nearly 78% of subjects who expressed some level of satisfaction with the complaint handling process. The remainder were either dissatisfied (10%, n=46) or very dissatisfied (12%, n=56) with the company response.

Customer Perception of Quality of Service

Type of Complaint. The SERVQUAL score was calculated as an additive score. Accounting complaints were overwhelmingly represented in the study, 54%, (See Table 2). Although rate complaints represented a sizable number, 19.9%, the remaining six complaint categories totaled 26%. Under statistical analysis, these would have canceled each other out. The number of responses in some categories were so low there would not have been enough remaining degrees of freedom to produce a valid statistical analysis. Therefore, these seven categories were combined and considered as "other" for purposes of statistical analyses.

At a significance level of .01, there was no significant difference in scores on SERVQUAL between males and females. Analysis of the *t*-test yielded *t* = 1.65, *df* = 1, and *p* = .099. At the .01 level there was a significant difference in scores on the SERVQUAL instrument by type of complaint (*t* = 3.24, *df* = 1, *p* = .001). In evaluating accounting complainants satisfaction with action taken, 18.3% (n=46) were fairly satisfied, 16.4% (n=41) were satisfied, and 41.1% (n=110) were very satisfied with corporate action taken on their complaint. This totaled nearly 76% of accounting complainants who expressed some level of satisfaction with the complaint handling process.

Customer Response to Complaint Handling

Patronage. Complainants were asked to respond to the degree to which they rented vehicles following complaint resolution. As shown in Table 3, in the short period following the

resolution of their complaint, three-fourths of the respondents rented as often or more often than before their complaint with this rental car company.

Table 3
Level of Customer Patronage Since Complaint Resolution

Patronage	n	%
Rent much more often than before	22	4.7
Rent more often than before	24	5.1
Rent about the same as before	304	65.2
Rent less often than before	40	8.6
Rent much less often than before	76	16.6

Statistical tests were run to determine if there was a relationship between patronage and gender. There was no significant difference in whether customers rented vehicles since filing their complaint by gender. The obtained $\chi^2 = 4.15$, *df* = 2, and *p* = .125 was not significant at the .01 level. The issue of degree of rental since complaint resolution was measured against type of complaint. When results were analyzed between the degree of rental since complaint resolution and type of complaint, there was no significant difference at the .01 level ($\chi^2 = 8.24$, with *df* = 4, *p* = .083).

Word-of-Mouth. In order to measure WOM communications, complainants were asked whether they had told others about their complaint, about how many people they told, and whether they would recommend the company to a friend. Descriptive results for these three questions are presented in Tables 4, 5, and 6. These items were then examined to determine if relationships existed between them and the variables of gender and type of complaint. No significant differences were found for any of these comparisons at the .01 level. In this study, the web of WOM extended to 2,230 others (Table 5), with each complainant telling about five people. Findings also indicated

that dissatisfied complainants told more than twice as many others as satisfied complainants, telling an average of 7.67 others. Satisfied complainants told an average of 3.12 others. In addition, over

Table 4
Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Following Complaint Resolution

<u>Told Others</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Yes	292	62.7
No	174	37.7

Table 5
Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Following Complaint Resolution

<u>Number Told</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
0	168	36.2
1	35	7.5
2	42	9.0
3	36	7.7
4	36	7.7
5	37	7.9
6	29	6.2
7	2	.4
8	5	1.1
9	2	.4
10	29	6.2
12	10	2.1
15	9	1.9
20	14	3.0
21	1	.2
25	2	.4
30	1	.2
40	3	.6
50	3	.6
100	2	.2

Table 6
Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Following Complaint Resolution

<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Yes	360	77.3
No	106	22.7

three-fourths of all respondents would recommend the company to a friend (Table 6).

Further statistical analyses were performed to examine whether relationships existed between the independent variable of customer satisfaction with corporate response and the dependent variables, customer perception of quality of service, patronage, and WOM. Analyses revealed that a relationship did exist among these variables. When patronage (degree of rental since filing complaint) was measured against customer satisfaction with action taken, a moderate relationship was found ($\chi^2 = 123.4$, $df = 4$, $p < .0001$) and was significant at the .01 level. When PWOM (would you recommend the company to a friend?) was measured against satisfaction with action taken, a moderate relationship was found ($\chi^2 = 108.4$, $df = 1$, $p = < .0001$). This means, the more satisfied a customer was, the more likely they were to recommend the company to a friend. In addition, a negative relationship was found to exist between customer satisfaction with action taken and the number of people told about the response. The finding, $t = 4.0$, $df = 1$, $p = .0001$, was significant at the .01 level. That is, the less satisfied a customer was, the more people the customer told about the experience.

SUMMARY

Customer satisfaction, when viewed as part of the consumer decision making process, is key to understanding post-purchase evaluation and behavior. In studying satisfaction with the complaint-handling process, this study examined the responses of complainants regarding their feelings toward the company following complaint resolution.

The corporation examined in this research deals with a large volume of complaints/inquiries which originate from four sources: Franchises, Corporate Locations, 1-800 Inbound, and International Locations.

Of the six hypotheses offered, only one yielded a significant difference. There was found to be a significant difference in customer perception of quality of service by type of complaint. In addition, some degree of relationship did exist between customer satisfaction with action taken and customer perception of quality of

service, patronage, and WOM.

DISCUSSION

The respondents who participated in this research were customers who had rented vehicles with the rental car company primarily in June, 1991 and had experienced problems with the rental in one way or another. The discussion which follows examines specific results and makes generalizations based upon these findings.

Analysis disclosed a significant difference in the perception of quality of service and the variable, type of complaint. Accounting complaints were overwhelmingly represented in this study, 54%. The findings of this research are compatible with those of Dorfman (1980) and Gilson (1981) who maintained that the most common complaints against rental car companies relate to overcharging and billing errors. Several researchers have shown that complaint behavior may be linked to the expense of the transaction (Andreasen, 1977; Kraft, 1977; Landon, 1977). Results of this study seem to support this notion since auto rental can be a relatively expensive proposition, approximately \$200 for an average rental. It may also be that consumers consider economic issues a valid reason for complaint.

In the instance of this company, accounting complaints were the easiest to resolve from the perspective of customer relations personnel. They had specific guidelines to follow and were authorized to refund or compensate a fixed amount depending on the circumstances of the rental. This research indicated that nearly 76% of accounting complainants showed some level of satisfaction with the complaint handling process. This would seem to support the findings of Goodwin and Ross (1990), that consumers preferred a tangible response to their complaint.

In this study, nearly 10% of respondents reported that they intended to rent from the company more often than before filing their complaint. This indicated that successful handling of complaints may have resulted in even greater brand loyalty than before. A total of 75% reported that they intended to patronize the company at least as often as they had before, illustrating that customers who take the time to complain tend to be more brand loyal. This is

consistent with past research which shows a tendency for complainants to be brand loyal (Gilly, 1987; Hirschman, 1970; Lewis, 1983; Singh, 1991; & TARP, 1986). By complaining, consumers are expressing an interest to stay with the service provider and help solve their problems.

Analysis revealed a relationship between customer satisfaction with action taken and WOM. In this study, 77.9% of all respondents showed some level of satisfaction with action taken on their complaint. In addition most of these respondents, 77.3%, would recommend the company to a friend. This is consistent with past research which found a strong relationship between satisfaction and positive WOM (Arndt, 1967; TARP, 1980).

Results for accounting complainants showed a higher level of positive WOM, since 81% would recommend the company to a friend as compared with 77.3% of all respondents. This too supports the notion of a relationship between satisfaction and positive WOM.

The propensity of respondents in this study to repatronize the service provider, and their willingness to recommend the company to a friend (positive WOM) may also be compatible with previous researchers' connection of the concept of perceived justice with repatronage intentions and negative WOM (Blodgett et al., 1993; Goodwin and Ross, 1989; Gilly, 1987, Tax and Chandrashekar, 1992). This may explain the higher number of accounting complainants who are willing to recommend the company to a friend, since these complainants received an immediate, tangible response from the rental car company.

Findings also indicated that dissatisfied complainants were more likely to tell others (negative WOM) than those who were satisfied. In this study, dissatisfied complainants told more than twice as many others as satisfied complainants. This is consistent with the TARP (1980) study which showed the same result.

In general, as customer satisfaction with action taken increased, willingness to do continued business with the company also increased, slightly. However, as dissatisfaction with action taken increased, the propensity to tell other about the experience increased. The results of this study suggest that business must take measures to maintain customer satisfaction in order to increase

patronage and decrease negative WOM.

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