

CONSUMER SATISFACTION RESEARCH: 1983-1992 ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and complaining behavior as a research area is discussed. Research prior to 1983 is used as a base to explain the evolution and accomplishments of the area from 1983-1992. Future directions for research are given.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is two fold. First we provide a brief report on the accomplishments of the consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and complaining behavior (hereafter CS) research stream over the last decade, 1983-1992. The second purpose is to suggest some topics for future CS research that have received little attention in the mainstream journals. A look at CS research since 1982 was prompted by the CS conference that year in which a set of papers reported on the state of CS research at that time. What has happened since 1982 and what "new topics" may be available for CS researchers? We will view CS from birth to 1982 as Act I; 1983 to 1992 as Act II; and research beyond this 1993 meeting date as Act III. What scenes and cast of characters have we seen as the drama of CS research has unfolded?

ACT I: CONSUMER SATISFACTION TO 1982 AND ACT II: 1983-92

The 1982 CS Conference included four papers that addressed the state of the art at that time (Day 1982, Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins 1982, Swan 1982 and Hunt 1982). We will touch on the main themes voiced in the four papers, Act I, and compare those themes to of a new decade of research, Act II, '83-92. We will start with Keith Hunt's insights.

Hunt (1982)

Keith Hunt provided a brief history of the emergence of CS as a research stream. His tally

showed that in 1972 only ten papers had been published. By 1982 Keith's CS bibliography had 560 papers/articles. His major conclusion was that CS had come a long way, but much remained to be done to refine existing models and measures and link the marketing/consumer science work to the more general social science literature in psychology, sociology, anthropology and organizational behavior.

Looking to the future, we are confident that if a "history of social science" paper is ever written about CS, that paper will mark 1976 as the birth of CS research with the first CS Conference that Keith organized (Hunt 1977). Our history will also conclude that the early series of CS conferences that Keith Hunt and Ralph Day jointly presented kept the CS baby healthy.

Following up on Keith's idea of taking a look at the volume of CS research, we were curious to see if it had become well established in terms of appearance in the main stream journals, and decided to compare the ten years before the 1992 conference (1973 through 1982) to the most recent ten years (1983 through 1992) for the *Journal of Marketing*, *JM*, and *Journal of Marketing Research*, *JMR*. We selected those two because as general journals CS had to compete with every other marketing topic. In the first ten years (1973-82), some 4 appeared in *JM* and 5 in *JMR* for a total of 9. During the 1983-92 decade, *JM* had 12 and *JMR* 8 CS articles, a total of 20. To place the CS total of 20 in perspective, for another venture, one of the authors identified each sales force article in *JM* and *JMR*, in which a sample of salespeople was used (1975-1991). Over a ten year period, the sales force articles would have averaged 25, and that has been an active research topic. We believe that CS research has become an established research stream in the marketing literature.

Finally, has Keith's call to link "marketing based" CS research with the general social sciences been answered? Aside from contributions with roots in psychology, it is our impression that the main stream journal reports on CS in *JM*, *JMR*, and the *Journal of Consumer Research*, *JCR*,

have made little use of work in sociology, anthropology and organizational behavior. We will note a few exceptions later in this paper when we turn to future research possibilities.

Other Voices From The 1982 Conference

The perspectives on CS offered by Day (1982), Swan (1982) and Woodruff et al.(1982) are considered in this section. In order to determine what has happened since 1982, we have drawn from a complete and insightful review of CS by Yi (1990) which cited research through 1988, and we checked the *JMR*, *JM* and *JCR* for articles from 1989 through 1992. None appeared in *JMR* (see Table 1).

**Table 1
Consumer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction &
Complaining Behavior Research In Two
Journals: 1989 - 1992**

<u>Journal of Consumer Research</u>	<u>Journal of Marketing</u>
Oliver and Swan (1989)	Bitner (1990)
Bolton and Drew (1991)	Bitner, Booms & Tetreault (1990)
Westbrook and Oliver (1991)	Bolton & Drew (1991)
Stayman, Alden and Smith (1992)	Oliva, Oliver and MacMillan (1992)
	Fornell (1992)

Our report on CS from 1983 through 1992 will only touch on major themes in the literature. We have not addressed a number of details that could be of importance to a researcher who was interested in a specific topic such as concepts and measurement of satisfaction. How did the authors noted above view CS in 1982, Act I, and how has CS evolved since 1982, Act II?

A major insight presented by each of the observers of the CS scene in 1982 was that much of the empirical and conceptual work at that time

was organized around what we will call the "standard disconfirmation paradigm". It was summarized by Woodruff, et al (1982, p. 118) as consisting of " a sequence of forming standards for performance, comparing how an object actually lived up to the standard, and perceiving any discrepancy (disconfirmation) as reason for feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction..."

Day (1982) wrote that CS could be modeled in terms of a flow across four stages: 1) prepurchase: attitude, expectations-- 2) consumption: disconfirmation-- 3) evaluation: satisfaction, attitude-- 4) response: intentions, complaining, repurchase. During prepurchase, consumer knowledge and experiences influence the formation of expectations, the prediction of what product performance will be, and attitudes. At consumption, expectations are compared to perceptions of performance to produce a confirmation/disconfirmation of expectations. During evaluation, the consumer responds to confirmation/disconfirmation with feelings of being satisfied, indifferent or dissatisfied. The direction and intensity of satisfaction results in response which can range from ignoring the consumption event to strong complaining behavior.

Viewing CS from birth to 1982 as Act I and 1983 to 1992 as Act II, we will tell you that Act II contains the same set of characters as Act I: expectations, attitude, performance, disconfirmation, satisfaction, intentions, attitude, complaints, that are interacting in the same ways. At least those are our conclusions from Yi's (1990) survey of the literature and our brief look at some very recent articles shown in Table 1.

However, Act II is different from Act I as the plot has become richer and some of the subplots have been resolved. Woodruff et al (1982) observed that while the standard disconfirmation paradigm provided a broad framework for research up to that time, disagreement existed about the details of how the process operates. Yi's (1990) review suggested that disagreement still exists about the details, and conflicting findings can be found in different studies.

However, instead of emphasizing disagreement and conflicting findings, another view of the standard paradigm is to argue that it has served the classic function of a paradigm that Kuhn (1970) recognized. This is to supply both theory and

accepted methods that provide the foundation for a coherent tradition of scientific research. While most, if not all, recent research has been within the disconfirmation paradigm, inquiry has been extended to new or seldom explored phenomena, such as emotions as post purchase phenomena (Westbrook and Oliver 1991) and to new settings. A major extension of disconfirmation to new settings has been to services in the major marketing journals (Bolton and Drew 1991a and 1991b, Bitner 1990, Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990, Oliva, Oliver and MacMillan 1992). The disconfirmation model of satisfaction has also guided a number of inquiries in a "services" journal, the *Journal of Health Care Marketing*.

Finally, empirical evidence has been obtained in the last decade about some "details" that represented speculation and possibilities in 1982. Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins in 1982 suggested that experienced based norms, such as the best brand norm, the performance of the best brand in a product category, would serve as a comparison base. Later they found that the best brand norm was better than expectations, predicted performance, in explaining satisfaction (Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987). Swan (1982) proposed that satisfaction could be sensitive to equity, and evidence was found for that possibility (Oliver and Swan 1989).

Our account of the scene in 1982 would not be complete without recalling that Ralph Day (1982) urged us to strive for commonly defined constructs. The need for common definitions was prompted by his observation that a number of different conceptualizations for each of the major components in the disconfirmation paradigm could be found in the literature. Later, Yi (1990) made the same complaint. If we don't speak the same language, how can we get our act together? While common terms would certainly facilitate communication, Kaplan (1964, p. 70,71) warns us against the premature closure of ideas as the demand for precise definitions may occur in a research tradition before we are in a position to judge what might make the most appropriate conceptual scheme. CS is a young field, so perhaps it is too early to settle on rigid definitions.

We believe that since the same term, such as expectations, can have different meanings the individual researcher should provide a brief

definition. Another possibility would be to "reserve" the unmodified term "expectations" for reference to the most common definition. Thus "expectations" would mean predictions of performance. A different notion of expectations could be indicated by a suitable modifier. If by expectations, one had in mind the performance that the consumer feels he/she should receive, that could be termed "normative expectations".

This concludes our brief account of Act II of CS, the decade of 1983 to 1992. Next we turn to possibilities for Act III, CS into the next century and millennium.

FUTURE TOPICS FOR CS RESEARCH: ACT III

Let us look briefly at three areas for future research topics: 1) satisfaction of the organizational buyer; 2) managerial use of satisfaction measures; and 3) consumer satisfaction as a societal goal.

Industrial Buyer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction

Have the concepts in the satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining area carried over to the industrial buyer? In 1981 Trawick and Swan (1981) empirically tested a model of industrial satisfaction/complaining behavior, and gave directions for future research. What has been done since? The answer is "almost nothing." Since 1983 no articles were found in either the *Journal of Marketing* or the *Journal of Marketing Research*. Only four articles were found in the *Journal of Business Research* or *Industrial Marketing Management* specifically addressing industrial buyer satisfaction. Two were essays (Wilson 1985, Powers 1988). Barksdale, et.al. (1984), examined the notion that the industrial buyer's propensity to complain is dependent upon situational characteristics, such as the number of suppliers. Graham (1986) investigated how problem-solving-oriented bargaining strategies influenced buyer satisfaction in a negotiation experiment.

Thus the issues raised in the Trawick and Swan (1981) article are still unresolved. The field is wide open. Specifically, some areas of future investigation could include:

1. What factors determine expectations in the buying process?
2. How does confirmation/disconfirmation affect the industrial buyer's satisfaction?
3. What role does complaining behavior play in future buying decisions?
4. Are relationships between complaining and repurchase from the same vendor direct, indirect, or both in the buyer's current and future buying decisions?
5. How do satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining concepts fit into a general model of industrial buyer behavior?

Use of Satisfaction Measures

A second area of potential research is the use of satisfaction measures by managers. In the academic journals only a single article was found, and it considered complaints, not satisfaction. Fornell and Westbrook (1984) found that organizational willingness to listen to consumer complaints decreased as the level of consumer complaints increased. Also, they found that unwillingness to listen to consumer complaints contributed to increased complaints, creating what they termed a "vicious circle."

However, there is apparently widespread interest among companies. Five articles discussing use of satisfaction data by firms were found in the January- April, 1993, issues of the *Marketing News*. Honomichl (1993) reported that spending on consumer satisfaction measurement programs was 28% higher for 1992 when compared to 1991. Such programs are being used more in the service areas, such as banking (Skolnick 1993) and health care (Gilbert 1993). Hayes (1993) points out that satisfaction parallels the current "hot" topics of total quality management and quality service. Schlosserg (1993) makes the point that some firms have difficulty using satisfaction data, in that they don't know what to do with it once the information has been collected. Thus this area is also one where basic "academic" research can and should be done. It would be useful to know not only how companies use satisfaction data, but also which methods are the most successful. How the data should be used is also an area to explore?

Societal Perspectives

The examination of consumer satisfaction and the response of organizations to complaints from a societal perspective is a third research agenda for the future. CS researchers have implicitly assumed that more consumer satisfaction and better response to complaints would make a positive contribution to society. However, the possibility of negative consequences should not be ignored.

Certainly experiences can be found of the positive results of satisfaction. A colleague related the story of attending the Consumer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction Conference, returning to his hotel room, and finding that by mistake the maid had discarded a container of a medication that he had to take. He had no other supply and complained to the hotel desk. The hotel person contacted a local pharmacist, had the prescription sent over, and paid for it. Our colleague was very satisfied and he felt that the hotel person enjoyed being empowered to solve the problem.

Are all of the consequences of consumer satisfaction positive for all concerned? We are aware of at least some reports of negative consequences including: 1) "no time for banana time"; and 2) the personal cost of emotional labor.

Studies of production workers have found that a source of satisfaction is the practice of pacing the work to make quota and allow for some "banana time", free time to relax and socialize on the job. As part of a quality management effort, which is linked to customer satisfaction since quality is often defined as satisfying the customer, Graham (1993) found that a philosophy of continuous improvement resulted in no time for banana time. Everyone was expected to make their job more efficient and that would intensify someone else's job.

Hochschild (1983) studied airline flight attendants who performed emotional labor. Attendants were required to offer passengers, some of whom were abusive/unreasonable, surface displays of the "right" feelings, as the customer must be satisfied. A result was that the flight attendants suffered from a sense of being "false" or mechanical. Producing customer satisfaction involved a personal cost of emotional labor.

Our conclusion is simply that we should not assume that more satisfaction is better for all

concerned. The positive and negative societal consequences of satisfaction should be explored.

CONCLUSION

Research on consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and complaining behavior has come a long way in a short period of time. A great deal has been accomplished, but there is still much to be done. Act III has many possibilities and there is room for many players. Hopefully, the next ten years will see an explosion of research that will be useful to marketers in their decision making and meet societal needs. Let the curtain rise!

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