

# THE INDUSTRIAL BUYER COMPLAINT PROCESS: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF FINDING AND FIXING VENDOR MISTAKES

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## ABSTRACT

Maintaining good customer relations is an important consideration for marketers of industrial products. An important component of this task is to identify and rectify any problems or mistakes that have occurred with an order. Although this activity is important, relatively little is known about how the complaint process occurs. The research reported in this paper explores the process of industrial buyer complaining through open-ended, ethnographic interviews with organizational purchasers. The results indicate that the process of organizational buyer complaining involves three interrelated steps of: (1) discovering that a vendor mistake or problem exists with an order; (2) investigating the problem to determine its cause and how it might be corrected; and (3) fixing the problem resulting from the mistake.

## INTRODUCTION

Investigations of industrial buyers have concentrated on the buying process, neglecting post-purchase activities such as dissatisfaction. Specifically, reports on the process of complaining by industrial buyers have not appeared in the literature. Our purpose is to present an inductive model of complaining by industrial buyers based on open-ended, ethnographic interviews with organizational purchasers in construction engineering and manufacturing. The major finding of this investigation is that complaining in response to a problem with an order placed with a vendor is a process that spans three interrelated steps. These steps include: (1) discovering that a mistake or problem exists with an order; (2) investigating the problem to determine its cause and how it might be corrected; and (3) fixing the problem by finding and implementing a solution to the problem.

This is the first effort to explicate the process of complaining by industrial buyers. Research on industrial buyer complaining has focused on identifying variables helpful in predicting

complaints, buyer satisfaction with the vendor's response when a complaint occurs, and to whom the buyer complains. However, the specific content of the complaint activities and the interaction between buyer and vendor has not been studied. In the following sections the literature on industrial buyer complaining is reviewed, the research design is presented, followed by a description and analysis of the complaint process. Finally, a discussion of the findings is presented followed by a brief conclusion.

## RESEARCH ON ORGANIZATIONAL BUYER COMPLAINING

Widely accepted models of purchase behavior have been developed for industrial buyer behavior (Sheth 1973; Webster and Wind 1972; Bonoma and Johnston 1978; Robinson, Faris, and Wind 1967). The buying process for organizational customers begins with problem recognition, continues through evaluation and decision stages, and concludes with performance evaluation (Robinson, Faris, and Wind 1967). Even though work on industrial buyer behavior is extensive, the understanding of industrial complaint behavior is limited. One reason for this is that few models of industrial complaint behavior have been conceptualized (Williams and Rao 1981; Trawick and Swan 1981). It is vitally important to extend the conceptual and empirical research of buyer behavior into an investigation of the post-purchase process of complaining.

Four papers have been identified that conceptually or empirically address industrial complaint behavior (Williams and Rao 1981; Trawick and Swan 1981; Barksdale, Powell, and Hargrove 1984; Dart and Freeman 1994). Williams and Rao (1981) present a conceptual model of complaint behavior. In their model, organizational complaint behavior is seen as the product of five antecedent variables: (1) individual variables; (2) situational variables; (3) organizational/structural variables; (4) the type of purchase; and (5) satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

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Their conceptualization is drawn from Webster and Wind's (1972) model and Sheth's (1973) model of industrial buyer behavior. These authors also borrow from the consumer literature making use of the expectancy/disconfirmation paradigm; dissatisfaction is conceptualized as the discrepancy between expectations for product performance and the actual product performance.

Trawick and Swan (1981) develop a model of organizational satisfaction/complaining behavior and explore determinants of industrial buyer satisfaction. They report that satisfaction is a result of whether or not the desired response from the supplier equals the actual response. These results support the theoretical underpinnings of the expectancy/disconfirmation paradigm. Trawick and Swan (1981) also report that previous satisfaction in dealing with a supplier produces positive expectations in the buyer regarding future exchanges. Finally, Trawick and Swan (1981) found that buyers with power in the dyad were more likely to receive the desired response from the supplier.

Barksdale, Powell, and Hargrove (1984) investigate four hypotheses regarding various aspects of organizational complaining behavior. Their hypotheses include the following: (1) there is a positive relationship between the purchase price of a product and the propensity to complain; (2) the propensity to complain will be greater in situations where there are relatively few suppliers; (3) the number of complaints will be highest in a new task buying situation and (4) more complaining will take place when the relationship with the supplier is an existing one. Basically, their data did not support the hypotheses.

Dart and Freeman (1994) examine the response styles of dissatisfied customers in the industrial market. Four response styles were identified that included such behaviors as switching vendors and complaining to the vendor or to third parties. In summary, our review of the industrial complaint behavior literature found that little or no research has conceptually or empirically examined the details involved in the process of industrial complaining behavior. Swan and Trawick (1994) reported an ethnographic analysis of industrial buyer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with delivery service. Qualitative (Vyas and Woodside 1984), and ethnographic (Prus 1989) research on

purchasing has been the topic of two additional studies. However, none of the three articles just mentioned focussed on complaining.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This article is based on open-ended in-depth interviews with purchasers in construction engineering and manufacturing. The methodology includes four major activities: (1) initiating the project, (2) collecting data, (3) sampling informants, and (4) analyzing the data and identifying the main themes in the complaining process. As is typical for ethnographic research, the four activities overlap.

The project began in 1990 as a result of a phone call to the senior author (here after I) from a member of the local Professional Purchasing Association (PPA) asking if I would be interested in becoming their University Advisor. This led to nine months of attending PPA meetings as both the University Advisor and a participant observer. Attendance at the PPA meetings was crucial in order to develop interview questions which would be relevant to the purchasers in terms of their work experience. Regular attendance also helped to establish a rapport with purchasers fostering their willingness to be interviewed at length.

### Collecting Data

Our initial interest was in learning about how purchasers experienced their work in general and their careers in purchasing. An interview guide was prepared. In the first question, I asked the purchaser to "describe a day in their work." From that point on, I would let the purchaser answer the questions as he/she chose to. I would not ask another question until some cue suggested that the purchaser had come to the end of their train of thought. Sometimes I would seek clarification or follow up on a thought that was of special interest to me. Following the first main question, I asked questions especially relevant to this article. For example, "I am interested in learning how you buy. What do you do in order to buy? It may help me to understand if you could tell me about a recent purchase. How did it start?" The informants would then talk at some length about the steps they went through in purchasing. A key

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question followed in which the informants were asked: "Do you sometimes have problems with vendors? What? What actions do you take?"

Most interviews required a little over an hour to complete and all were conducted at the purchaser's work place. Quotations are from tape recordings of the interviews. In a few instances they are based on field notes as a result of some recording problems. All of the names are pseudonyms. When the data was analyzed for this article, I had attended PPA meetings for over 4 years. I made brief notes of what I heard purchasers say about their work at these meetings. While the meetings were not specifically focused on the interview questions, some of the purchaser's remarks during meetings covered the same basic topics. I found that what I had been told in the interviews was congruent with their remarks at these meetings.

### Sampling Informants

This article is a preliminary effort to analyze the complaint process and is based on an analysis of purchasers in: (1) construction engineering, (the design and construction of industrial plants); and (2) manufacturing, (including both process manufacturing, - the continuous production of standardized items; and job shop manufacturing - the production of made to order industrial machinery and equipment). Four construction engineering and six manufacturing informants were chosen based on a rapport established during attendance at PPA meetings.

The sample used in this study is small in comparison to most work done in marketing, however it is not unprecedented. For example, Bettman (1970) relied on two consumers to study information processing. Wilson (1985) argues strongly for the use of small samples to develop organizational buying theory. Qualitative research typically obtains in-depth information drawn from small samples. As an example, Steffensmeier (1986) has a book length account of a fence (a dealer in stolen goods) based largely on extended interviewing of one professional fence.

### Analysis of the Interviews

Typed interview transcripts were coded in

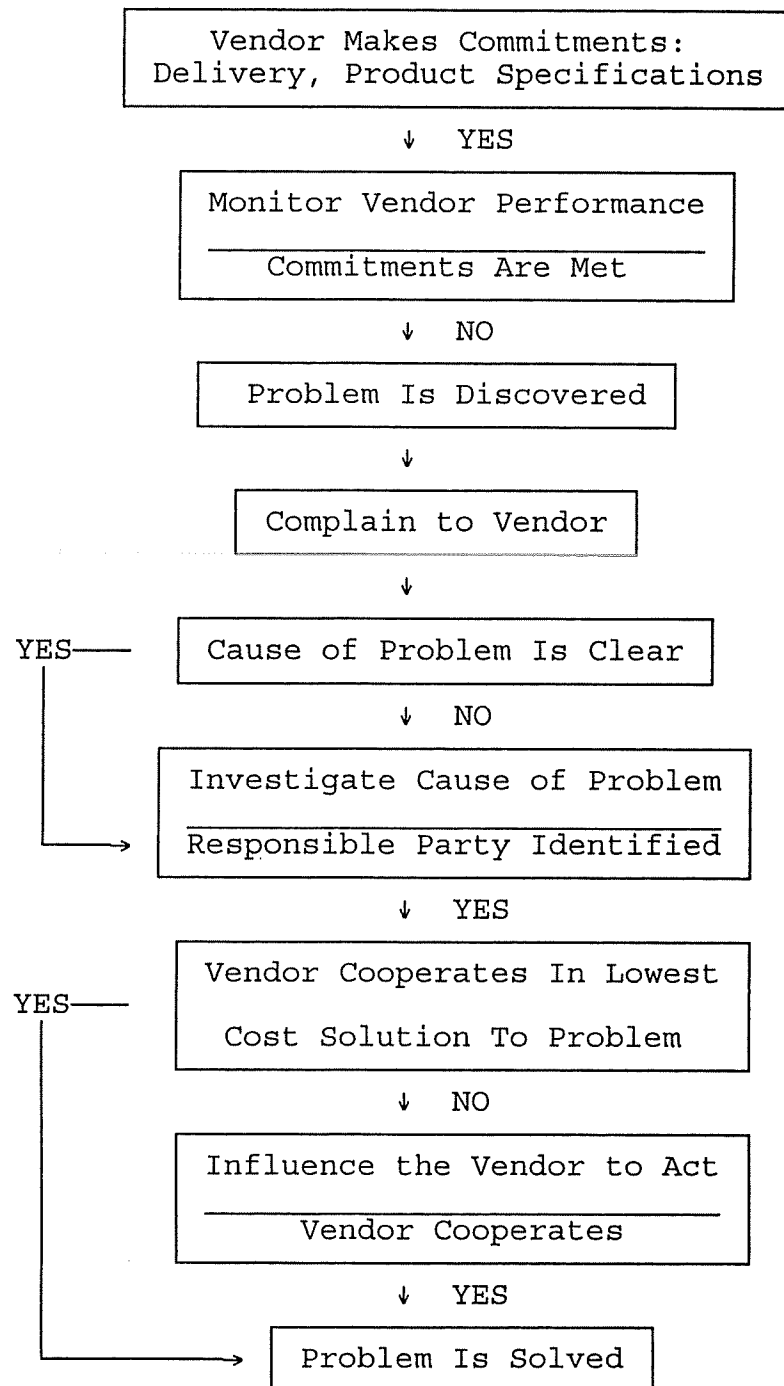
terms of relevant concepts. The coded material was then sorted and analytically organized using the WordPerfect 5.1 program search and sort commands to evaluate key concepts and their interrelationships. During the process, concerns about correcting vendor mistakes emerged as an issue of central importance to purchasers. Our analysis therefore focused on two questions: 1) What *types of actions* emerged from purchasers' work experiences in response to a problem or mistake with an order?; 2) What particular *complaint processes* do industrial purchasers undertake?

### COMPLAINING IN THE CONTEXT OF PURCHASING WORK: AN OVERVIEW

The focus of this report is on three important steps in the complaint process: (1) discovering a vendor mistake or problem that exists with an order; (2) investigating the problem to determine it's cause and how it might be corrected; and (3) fixing the problem - finding and implementing a solution to the problems resulting from the mistake. The overall process reported in this paper is seen in Figure 1. Before discussing these steps in detail, we will briefly report on how complaining is rooted in the broader context of purchasing. In particular, complaining follows the failure of a vendor to fulfill a commitment made to a buyer. Industrial buyers often negotiate with and choose a vendor based upon a series of commitments made by the vendor for delivery date, product specifications, warranty coverage, price, and other items.

Complaining arises when the purchaser discovers that the vendor has not or will not be able to meet one or more of the commitments made. Purchasers define a problem as a discrepancy between vendor performance and vendor commitment. Purchasers have a responsibility to solve problems arising from their orders. To solve those problems the cause of the problem must be investigated and action must be taken to fix the problem. Vendor cooperation and support is needed by purchasers in discovering, investigating and solving problems. We define complaining as the purchaser communicating to the vendor in order to have the vendor take some action towards solving the problem. Complaining

**Figure 1**  
**The Industrial Buyer Complaint Process Finding and Fixing Vendor Mistakes**



is only part of the complaint process which involves a number of activities and events, starting with purchaser recognition that a problem has

probably occurred, and ending with an attempt to resolve the problem.

## FINDING AND INVESTIGATING VENDOR PROBLEMS

### Finding that a Problem Exists

The first step taken in the complaint process involves finding or discovering that a problem indeed exists. Recognition of the problem is accomplished by monitoring vendor performance through a variety of activities designed to compare vendor performance to commitments, such as delivery dates, and product specifications, that the vendor made. One type of monitoring is comparing vendor progress to a schedule for completing activities.

In construction engineering, once a vendor has committed to supply a major engineered product (i.e. a custom built piece of equipment) by a particular due date, the next phase in the procurement process begins. This process involves monitoring vendor progress and taking action if it becomes necessary. In some firms the purchaser does the monitoring work, while in other companies the task is performed by "expeditors." Doris Cole, construction engineering, explained that after the vendor has been awarded a contract for materials and committed to a delivery date:

Then our expeditor will take over and my expeditor then will see in the system that this purchase order is done. Once that happens, it feeds another system that tracks the material based on a component code number. That component code number will show up in the system. Our expeditor (will think) "o.k. I see this material is due to ship on", and she has a promise date. Now, if she does not receive papers documenting the fact that this material has been shipped. Or if there is not a RIR report, receiving and inspection report, that comes back from the job site stating that "yes" the equipment has been received. Then that's when they come in and they start calling people with problems.

Additional monitoring activities include receiving and inspection. Receiving involves comparing goods delivered to what was ordered. Inspection is the process of checking to see if

incoming items meet specifications. Specifications are relatively objective product attributes, such as meeting particular technical criteria, considered essential by customers or users within the firm. In discussions about a new vendor, Ken Vincent, job shop manufacturing, described the role of inspection in identifying a problem with that vendor:

I send to the shop a note ... "new vendor, let's check out materials a little extra than we normally would." [Do they make physical tests? Is that just for new vendors then?]

Ken: Well all the material that comes in would be checked eventually. We ask them to check this early so if we do have a problem then I can have the vendor replaced.

In summary, the process of finding supplier mistakes is accomplished by monitoring vendor performance. When a discrepancy is found between vendor commitment and vendor performance, the possibility of a potential supplier mistake is recognized. We use the phrase "potential supplier mistake" to indicate that purchasers sometimes find that the cause of a problem is not clear. In these cases an investigation of the problem must be conducted.

### Investigating Possible Vendor Problems

Discovering that a problem exists often means that the vendor has failed to meet a commitment. In some instances it is clear to the purchaser that the vendor is the cause of the problem. In these cases the purchaser simply contacts the vendor and requests cooperation in solving the problem. However, the cause of a problem may be ambiguous. In these cases the purchaser must investigate the situation further to ascertain its origin and cause. Sending the wrong material could be an unambiguous problem to William Wilson, process manufacturing:

Sometimes they'll ship the wrong material or they might have the wrong code on the material. The lab man says if it's incorrect and he'll contact William. The lab man and William will contact the supplier about the problem. As an example, there is a standard

viscosity and the viscosity is tested by a chemical analysis. In reviewing the receiving document, that has the results of the chemical test, one of the things the lab man will look for is whether the viscosity is within the range (field notes).

On the other hand, the cause of a mistake may not be clear and the purchaser investigates the problem to determine who made a mistake and what can be done to correct it. A missed delivery date was investigated by William Wilson as it could be the fault of either the supplier or the freight line transporting the goods:

(Are delivery dates ever missed?)

Yes I get on the telephone and try and find a truck load of rubber or the FTL (Full Truck Load) amounts, where it is or what happened. First I will call the supplier. (Can they tell you sometimes if the truck was delayed?). Yes, I will ask them, this is my P.O. Yesterday I purchased it, you said you're going to ship it on a certain date. Where is it? Will you please find out where it is and return the call and give me a pro number where I can contact the freight line in Birmingham? Maybe I can rush them up, we are running out here.

Once a problem is clear to the purchaser, the next step usually taken in the complaint process is to solve it.

## **FIXING MISTAKES**

### **Types of Mistakes and Solutions**

Fixing a vendor mistake or problem depends on the type of mistake. While the specific type of mistake varies by firm and industry, purchasers speak frequently about two generic types of problems: 1) delivery was or would be delayed; and 2) a delivered item failed to meet specifications.

**Not meeting the delivery date.** Not having an item arrive on time can be costly to the firm. In construction engineering and job shop manufacturing materials are purchased for projects that are planned according to a schedule. If

materials are not available to meet schedule deadlines, disruption of the work flow can be quite costly. Production can also be disrupted in process manufacturing. The two basic ways of fixing the problem is to change the schedule, or induce the vendor to speed up delivery.

Vendor cooperation in preventing a late delivery is expressed by Ken Collins, process manufacturing:

The delivery date is considered sacred in the industry (and) if someone promises to deliver on Oct. 1, then it is expected if it can't be done, the supplier should tell Ken and substitute a borrowed film (packaging material borrowed from another vendor) in order to cover the order (Field notes).

Rescheduling is also a basic solution to an anticipated late delivery and it is sometimes possible with a minimal loss. As Jack Harris, construction engineering, explained:

A better job in my mind is a vendor that has a project manager that communicates real well. He responds to our communications. I mean they may have a major problem but if they don't tell us it becomes even more of a problem. Tell us about it and we can make adjustments to either help them overcome it or minimize the impact. Say it's in the delivery schedule. If that project manager has told us look it ain't gonna meet that date, if we know that we don't have a crane sitting there waiting to unload it or field people waiting to go to work on it or whatever - so it's really communication.

**Not meeting specifications.** The two most prominent solutions to an item not meeting specifications is to have the vendor replace the item or have the buying firm rework the off-specs material. Replacement could delay work in process therefore reworking is sometimes selected. Vendors were asked to pay "charge backs" to reimburse the purchaser's firm for costs of reworking "off-specs" material. Charles Saunders, job shop manufacturing, explained that when off-specs problems occur:

Mr. Saunders will determine if his company can use the part. If the defect is slight or if the job is in a hurry they might adjust the part. A lot of times they'll do that. Charles gave as an example a part that was too large and they had to spend some money on grinding to get it to the correct size. He will call the vendor to inform the vendor of the problem and give the vendor an estimate of the cost that rework is probably going to require. In some cases the vendor will be able to give him a new part immediately, in which case rework will not be done. However, if rework is done, the cost is charged back to the vendor (Field notes).

### Selecting a Solution

Purchasers select a solution to a problem on the basis of what is technically possible and lowest in cost. Sometimes reworking materials is not a viable solution. As the last two quotes illustrate, purchasers will seek a solution that minimizes costs to their firm. Some purchasers also try to reduce vendor's costs. Jack Harris, construction engineering, will not push the supplier to meet a delivery date if his company is behind schedule and that remedy causes overtime production costs:

They (our company's project) might be behind schedule and really don't need it when the order says and I want to make sure that the expediter checks (that possibility).

### Vendors Do Not Always Cooperate In Fixing Mistakes

Usually, the purchaser's request for vendor assistance in solving problems is honored. However, vendors do not always cooperate in solving the problem. Consequently purchasers experience refusals and delays.

**Refusals.** Occasionally, vendors may refuse to take the action requested by the purchaser to solve a problem. Vendors voice two main types of justifications for not cooperating. Suppliers claim that they are: 1) not responsible for the problem; or 2) some contingency makes it impossible to meet the purchaser's request.

Vendor claims of no responsibility could rest on the assertion that the vendor did not agree to assume liability for problem or that the problem was not caused by the vendor. John Barker, construction engineering, discussed the negotiating of warranty responsibility with a vendor:

Well a lot of times equipment is delivered maybe 6 months or a year prior to the time when we would actually start using the equipment. He's (vendor) sitting there saying no, no, no, no. Said I will only guarantee it for a year from the time I deliver it to you. I'm saying no, no we've got to have it for 12 maybe 18 months in our care, custody and control when we're not using it. And your guarantee is not good until we start using it. So those are the things that you're trying to get resolved. To what extent will they guarantee it. Generally a manufacturer like - he's guaranteed this product and a widget breaks, he wants to just give you a new widget. And we insist that he takes the old one out and puts the new one in at his expense.

Murry Dill, construction engineering, listed some of the causes of problems that were beyond vendor responsibility:

I feel like we are very fair. If it's our problem, or caused by our construction people, or poor design on our part, if we gave them the wrong information, and we belly up to the bar and pay our share of it.

**Delays.** Sometimes vendors cooperate, but delay acting on the purchaser's request for information about a problem. Sometimes the vendor is unresponsive in solving a problem. Delays are aggravating to Ken Vincent, job shop manufacturing:

I kept up a sheet on all the orders and one of them had been delayed six different times. I'm not the only one experiencing it (delay in delivery) at this particular moment. But I am calling both of them in. (Oh you can see they are beginning to run late?) Right and I want to do it now before it gets to the point that it

did last year - try to catch it ahead of time. (What verbally do some of the representatives say when the problem is pointed out?) They will come up with a variety of excuses. Generally its a maintenance problem is what I would get. The certain part of a line had to be shipped out for maintenance, whether its the furnace or the rollers or something of that nature - we are going through a problem like that but we guarantee that its fixed now and this will not happen.

### **Influencing the Vendor to Take Action**

Usually, purchasers only need to contact the vendor and they will cooperate in investigating and solving order problems. As noted above, in some instances vendors refuse to cooperate and delay. Purchasers attempt to influence reluctant vendors to act by exercising power. The primary sources of purchaser power include withholding payment and the promise of more business. Withholding payment is a threat used by Doris Cole, construction engineering:

On difficult cases (the vendor has refused a request to meet a delivery date) and at that time we would put the pressure to bear to be sure that the equipment arrived to the site on time. (What might be some of the pressure you'd put to bear?) Well one of the things I could do is if I have existing monies that is due to them on another contract or whatever I'll say: "By the way let me just hold this invoice up until you get your equipment to the site on time, how is that?"

Sometimes suggesting that continual delays will harm the vendor's future business is employed by Ken Vincent, job shop manufacturing:

Well, late shipments are a problem with us right now. I explained about this mad rush we have here. Monday Continental Steel Company (will come) and Chicago Steel will have their man in here tomorrow morning to go over the orders because a lot of them have items that have shifted as much as a month. So I'll have to come in, pound on the desk and whatever, to tell them that this is

unacceptable. ... I can sort of threaten to give one or the other more of the business because the one in front of me is slow; and I think they know I would do it, and I would.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Nature of the Organizational Buyer Complaint Process**

The process of organizational buyer complaining involves three interrelated steps of: (1) discovering that a vendor mistake or problem exists; (2) investigating the problem to determine it's cause and how it might be corrected; and (3) fixing the problem by finding and implementing a solution to it. The steps in this process are clearly interrelated since the discovery of a problem with an order is necessary for the other steps to occur. The process is also emergent and contingent. As an example, if the cause of a problem is clear to the purchaser, the "investigation" step will be skipped and the purchaser will work towards a solution.

We found that complaining, a purchaser's communications to vendors in identifying and correcting order problems, is part of a larger purchasing process. An order is placed after the vendor has made commitments to on-time delivery of a product that meets specifications. By monitoring vendor performance with vendor commitment, failure to meet those commitments are discovered. If the cause of the order problem is ambiguous, the buyer investigates the problem in order to uncover the responsible party.

The solution to an order problem depends on the type of problem, and it's technical possibilities for different solutions and their costs. Solutions to late delivery include rescheduling the buying firm's project and/or asking the vendor to speed up delivery. Other problems such as not meeting product specifications can be solved by either replacing or reworking the material. A disruption in the buying firm's project or process is often costly, and the solution that will minimize the disruption is typically preferred by the purchaser.

Once the problem is discovered, the purchaser usually seeks the vendor's assistance. In all remaining steps of the complaining process, including investigating and fixing the problem,



complaining is a very much a joint buyer-seller activity. Usually vendors provide assistance to purchasers in solving order problems. However, vendor cooperation in solving problems is not a given. Purchasers experienced refusals and delays. Vendor justification for refusals and delays include disclaiming responsibility for the problem and asserting that the situation is beyond the supplier's ability to control. Influencing reluctant vendors to act by exercising power is a typical purchaser response to a refusal or delay. One example of exercising purchaser's power is threatening the loss of future business to the vendor and withholding payments.

The complaint process is summarized in Figure 1. However, one final observation needs to be made. Our treatment of industrial complaining and Figure 1 suggests that the process ends with vendor cooperation and solution of the problem. That is an over simplification. In some situations, the vendor may be unable or unwilling to cooperate and solve the problem. In that case, the purchaser may find it necessary to find a solution that does not involve the vendor. A job shop purchaser found that the vendor tried, but could not fix a product failing to satisfy specifications. Finally the purchaser's firm took the product and reworked it.

### Managerial Implications

Knowledge of the steps in the process of industrial buyer complaining suggests a number of implications for marketers. First the process of finding and/or discovering a problem is an ongoing process. Several mechanisms exist to monitor the vendor's performance. These mechanisms are used to alert the buyer when a problem occurs. Problem recognition is seen by purchasers as the difference between vendor performance, and prior vendor commitment. This finding indicates that vendors should carefully position their commitments to buyers so as to not create unrealistic customer expectations. Unrealistic customer expectations can lead to industrial buyer complaining.

This research also has found that determining the cause of a problem can be problematic. Buyers typically have systems in place to define, detect, and bring to the vendor's attention

problems that occur. Therefore, it is necessary for the vendor to understand the purchaser's definition of a problem, in addition to understanding the purchaser's detection process. This understanding will be helpful in developing procedures that can prevent problems from occurring in the future. In order to accomplish this task, it requires the vendor to look at the situation through the buyer's eyes.

The process of correcting a mistake was found to be common across buying organizations. Several different types of mistakes were identified. In each type the buyer expected the vendor to take action that minimized the adverse consequences of the problem. Buyers were clearly not pleased when mistakes occurred but appeared to be relieved when efforts were taken by the vendor to correct, and minimize the damage of the mistake. Buyers were also found to encounter situations where the vendor sought to avoid responsibility for correcting the problem. This particular action caused severe customer relations problems, typically resulting in the buyer trying to force the vendor to take corrective actions. Vendors must understand that buyers expect corrective action to be taken without delay. Any action short of this remedy typically results in substantial loss of customer confidence.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reported inductive research on the industrial buyer complaining process. It is based on personal interviews with people directly involved in purchasing. This research serves as an initial attempt to investigate and explicate the process of industrial buyer complaining. By utilizing open-ended interviews, a number of insights concerning industrial buyer complaints have been uncovered.

First, the results indicate that the complaining process involves three main steps of discovering, investigating and correcting order problems. The process is emergent and contingent as initial events shape later buyer responses and concerns. Problems arise when vendor commitments are not fulfilled. The purchaser's main concern is to solve the order problem, but solutions often require the active cooperation of the vendor. The overall process appears to remain relatively constant

across different organizations. Understanding the impetus behind each stage of the process will be extremely beneficial to researchers interested in extending the study of complaint behavior from the consumer to the organizational market.

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