

CUSTOMER COMPLIMENTS AS MORE THAN COMPLEMENTARY FEEDBACK

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ABSTRACT

Customer compliments as under-researched forms of customer feedback are examined and ten propositions developed. Some preliminary findings from a pilot study are also presented in support of an extended set of motivations to explain complimenting behavior, that is, Complimenting behavior = $f(\text{delight, expected benefits, involvement, social norms, and personal and situational factors})$. Managerial and marketing implications are discussed throughout the paper, including a recommended four step process firms may use to capitalize on the potential that customer compliments offer: Step 1: Encourage compliments. Step 2: Recognize and capture compliments. Step 3: Understand compliments. Step 4: Act on compliments.

INTRODUCTION

One need not look beyond the title of this journal to realize that complaining behavior has played a central role in the study of consumer (dis)satisfaction for more than a quarter of a century. Indeed, it is difficult to discuss (dis)satisfaction or complaining behavior without mention of the other. In contrast, issues pertaining to consumer or customer compliments have received far less attention in the literature. However, customer compliments represent a potent form of feedback to businesses, and their potential for helping to shape both organizational and individual behaviors may be greater than that of customer complaints. The lack of attention in the literature to customer compliments seems quite unjustified.

To help give some momentum to the study of the role of compliments in shaping company policies, we will review some of the things we know about compliments and suggest some possible extensions to compliment research. We

believe that expanding the study of consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior to include compliments is important and propose that at least four steps are necessary to capitalize on the potential that customer compliments hold. Not only can marketing practitioners use the four step process to orchestrate their efforts, but consumer researchers can use the framework in their investigation of a broad range of compliment-relevant issues. These four steps include:

- Step 1: Encourage Compliments
- Step 2: Recognize Compliments
- Step 3: Understand Compliments
- Step 4: Act on Compliments

We will explain why we identify each of these steps, advance several propositions supporting the importance of each, and present some preliminary findings from a small-scale pilot study. We begin by examining a few issues that complaining behavior and complimenting behavior have in common, then progress toward issues more specific to compliments.

STEP 1: ENCOURAGING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

When Silence Is Not Golden

Business practitioners often seem to believe and act as though dissatisfaction is directly associated with complaining behavior, i.e., consumers complain because they are dissatisfied and consumers who don't complain must be satisfied. Consumer researchers know better, and a quick review of the literature demonstrates that only a very small proportion of dissatisfied consumers actually complain directly to businesses. (See for example Andreasen & Best 1977; TARP 1986)

Without customer feedback, unrecognized problems cannot be fixed and opportunities to develop and extend customer relationships are lost. But the fact that firms which are aware of complaints often do not systematically heed the message sent to them by the complainers is also very damaging. Oliver (1997) notes that as many as half of all customer complaining episodes actually end with even more dissatisfaction ("secondary dissatisfaction") produced by the business's responses to the complaint itself. Smart and Martin (1992) found that a lack of business response, particularly response addressing the issues raised by complaints, was a very major source of dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction with business responses, of course, leads to decreased future patronage of the firms allowing the secondary (dis)satisfaction to occur (Gilly and Gelb 1982). Many unfortunate outcomes from bad word-of-mouth to sales decreases might be avoided when businesses encourage complaints and respond appropriately to them (Oliver 1997). Consumer communications, whether in the form of complaints or compliments, must be heard and given attention. Even subtle compliments should be an integral part of the process of measuring the extent and the focal point of (dis)satisfaction -- even when these entail little more than consumers bestowing some sort of positive, above average rating on a company's customer comment card.

The case of a campground owner in Idaho exemplifies the unfortunate results of the ignorance of complaining behavior. The individual bragged to one of the authors that he had received only four complaints in his thirteen years in business. Despite Kotler's (1980) assertion that the concern of marketing managers should be to *increase* the number of consumer complaints to really find out how well their companies are serving customers, the campground owner apparently subscribed to the conventional and convenient point of view: "the fewer complaints, the better." In other words, the campground owner assumed that silent customers were satisfied, when any one of a multitude of reasons may have prevented the owner from

hearing complaints. For example, unhappy campers may not have known who to complain to, or perhaps they did voice complaints but front-line personnel never passed them along to the owner. Unhappy campers may have believed that management could not or would not act on their concerns, that it was too inconvenient to lodge a complaint, or that they would not benefit by doing so if they did not expect to camp at that campground again. Therefore, we are reminded of the following proposition that is well recognized in the literature:

P1: Consumer silence is not necessarily indicative of satisfaction. A business can not know if its customers are satisfied unless they inform the business accordingly.

A noteworthy article by Lewis (1983) commented on the relative infrequency of post-purchase consumer communications, concluding that people who complain will also compliment when warranted, but the majority of people will do neither one unless they feel strongly enough. Oliver's (1997) review of the literature confirms the overall low incidence of both complaining and complimenting behavior. So we are led to the second proposition:

P2: Just as complaints don't always accompany dissatisfaction, compliments don't always accompany satisfaction.

Encouraging Complaints and Compliments

Consumer communications which highlight high involvement instances of satisfaction, dissatisfaction and information seeking directly affect the quality of relationships with individual customers and the prospects for future patronage behavior. (see TARP 1979 and Martin and Smart 1994). Stephens and Gwinner (1998) examined how many potentially helpful complaints are never received because consumers fail to voice them, preferring instead to quietly discontinue patronage. This phenomenon, which they referred to as "silent defection," is a disaster for business

and management must understand that such behavior may occur for a number of correctable reasons. Contributing to the choice not to complain are consumers' perceptions of the psychological costs of complaining, the consumers' low "coping potential" which results from a lack of experience, fear of interpersonal discomfort, conflict and a low appraisal of the chances of positive outcomes of the situation. They concluded that firms must take actions to make complaining less costly and even *reward* consumers if the firm wishes to benefit from the information communicated through complaints.

Zeithaml and Bitner's services marketing text (1996) reviewed the need for continual consumer research to monitor company performance as a means of preventing the above mentioned silent customer loss. Consumer complaint solicitation and post-transaction surveys are at the top of their list of methods for this. Many firms, of course, initiate communication with consumers by intermittently conducting formal surveys, interviewing key customers, promoting their 800 telephone numbers and providing customer comment cards at the point of sale.

In contrast with typical one-shot market research campaigns, voluntary communications by consumers may arrive in a relatively heavy, continuous flow. Of course it is important that the firms have developed systematic procedures for recording reports from all of their relevant customer contacts.

Managing the Feedback Flow

In addition to encouraging customers to speak up, managing the channel of "feedback" has long been recognized as vital, especially in service industries where word-of-mouth communication is pervasive and plays a key role in helping prospective customers better understand what service they should expect before experiencing the service firsthand (Berry 1980). In this regard, marketing practitioners face a double challenge: First, to have customers channel any *negative* feedback directly to the company and not to other consumers, while second, simultaneously

encouraging the customers to spread *positive* comments about the company.

More recently, Internet technology and increasingly widespread access have accelerated the spread of the word-of-mouth phenomena, causing it to evolve into a "viral marketing" phenomena that businesses can not afford to ignore (Krishnamurthy 2001). With their e-mail lists and access to "chat rooms," for example, consumers can quickly and easily communicate with potentially thousands of other consumers. So, while it always has been advantageous for marketers to encourage the spread of positive word-of-mouth, the "virtual" evolution of the phenomena implies that the stakes for doing so have multiplied and that new technologies create new opportunities for doing so. It seems that word-of-mouth communications are now on steroids, necessitating the following reminder:

P3: Compliments, like complaints, may be heard by many.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPLIMENTS

A scan of the literature still leaves the impression that many firms treat complaints as fires to be put out but that compliments create no such sense of urgency. While compliments may be nice, do they have as much impact as complaints on business behavior? The possibility is there, but since there is surprisingly little research on consumer compliments, it is not clear from the marketing literature that this is true. However, despite the relative void in the consumer behavior and (dis)satisfaction literature, more evidence for the impact of praise and compliments on businesses can be found in the more general behavior modification literature or in the management literature pertaining to leadership, supervision, coaching, and training, specifically (e.g., see Cook, Hunsaker and Coffey 1997; Hrebiniak and Joyce 1984; Luthans 1985).

Customers as Trainers

In her book *Serving Them Right*, Laura

Liswood asserts that it's not the customer's job to train customer-contact employees (Liswood 1990). Her point is well taken in that service quality tends to suffer when workers do not possess the skills or knowledge to perform. It's probably safe to say that most consumers have felt frustrated or otherwise dissatisfied when "served" by poorly trained, apathetic and incompetent front-line workers and the consumer is forced to explain how the service should be provided. Understandably, customers don't want to break in new workers, but unfortunately such encounters seem to be an all too common fact of service life.

In response, customers may exhibit any one or a combination of behaviors. For example, they may suffer through such encounters with the resolve not to patronize the business again or avoid the offending worker in the future. They may complain to management with the expectation (or hope) that management will retrain or reprimand the worker or otherwise "take care of it." However, management may not take care of it, so disgruntled customers may not relay their experiences to management.

One reason managers may not take care of it has to do with the increasingly popular notion of employee empowerment, a practice that charges employees with the responsibility of "taking care of it" -- with management's blessings and often without management's knowledge. Proponents of the empowerment movement believe that the unique vantage point of the front line gives workers the needed perspective to make decisions that affect customer satisfaction. By making decisions on-the-spot, without deferring to a supervisor, workers can free supervisors' time for other things and decisions can be made swiftly (Bowen and Lawler 1992, 1995; Zemke and Schaaf 1989). The quicker customer complaints are resolved, the more likely customers are to be satisfied (Bitner 1990).

So, the practice of empowering service employees to take the initiative themselves to address customers' concerns or unique service requirements results in more of a hands off supervisory style, leaving employees to fend for themselves. It follows that when a customer-

contact employee's actions are not restricted by a micro manager or a detailed policy manual, s/he may look elsewhere for guidance. S/he may dip into her/his personal pool of experience, ask for advice from coworkers, or turn to the customer directly at hand. This latter possibility casts customers into potentially influential roles as coaches or trainers to educate front line workers, assertively suggest appropriate remedies to alleviate dissatisfaction, and otherwise shape behavior. Thus, even if we agree with Liswood's thesis that customers should not have to train employees, the numerous opportunities to do so seem apparent. In other words, a natural outgrowth of the practice of empowering employees is that of empowering customers too. Simply put:

P4: It may not be the customer's job to train front-line employees, but it is his/her opportunity.

The Power of Praise

Almost by definition, empowered consumers may draw from multiple influencing tactics to shape the behaviors of the customer-contact employees they "train." Common among the influencing attempts are elements of punishment (complaints) or reward (compliments). Compliments are an excellent indication that the service providers' actions have led to customers' satisfaction. These types of actions need to be encouraged so they will be repeated. Thus a most obvious use of compliments is to "Catch somebody doing something right" and reinforce the behavior. Public rewards, when very visible (such as an employee of the month designated parking place) can also promote vicarious learning by other employees who may strive for these performance standards. But not only should front line customer contact people be recognized, but also middle level managers who are the trainers and supervisors of these employees also should share in the appreciation (Hymowitz 1999).

The case for consumer compliments is fortified when we recognize that praise is likely to

be more effective than criticism. Consider that everyone engages in selective perception and finds that pleasant news is more easily heard than the unpleasant. In fact, it seems unlikely that recipients of flattering comments would conjure up counter-arguments. Agreeing with praise, but defensively posturing against complaints is human nature and perhaps corporate nature too.

This phenomenon was demonstrated in a 1988 study by Martin and Smart in which they posed legitimately as satisfied or dissatisfied customers and simultaneously wrote letters of praise and complaint to manufacturers of consumer packaged goods. In many cases companies attributed the cause of complaints to other parties or to uncontrollable circumstances, but the same companies readily accepted credit for complimentary remarks about the *same* issues. For example, when one member of the research team complained that too many cookies were broken, the manufacturer implied that the shipper or retailer was at fault. In response to a more flattering letter about the company's quality -- including few broken cookies -- the company touted its package design, its attention to detail and its workers' caring attitudes.

There also appears to be a greater opportunity for complimentary communications to influence businesses. The few available studies indicate that compliments may occur more frequently than complaints (Robinson and Berl 1980; Cadotte and Turgeon 1988; Martin and Smart 1988; Oliver 1997).

Martin and Smart (1988) reviewed the rise of the correspondence-handling function in Consumer Affairs departments as more and more firms recognized the importance of dealing quickly and accurately with consumer complaints and compliments as a means of customer retention. In this and a series of following articles they highlighted the opportunity for firms to cultivate consumer relationships following the receipt of complaints as well as a similar opportunity for productive communication with consumers following their compliments. Their examination of business responses to both compliments and complaints indicated that

businesses are increasingly more sensitive to the need to answer both types of communication than they have been in past years, though responses to compliments tended to be less well designed.

In summary then, it appears that:

P5: Consumer compliments are more likely to influence business behavior (including behavior of individual employees) than are consumer complaints.

STEP 2: RECOGNIZING COMPLIMENTS

In order to capture compliments for analysis and decision making, one must recognize them when they raise their heads. But as the following sections suggest, this task is easier said than done.

Compliments: Bring Your Own Definition

Sorry, we don't have a definition for "compliment." Much like popular business terms such as quality, service, involvement, and productivity, everyone knows what a compliment is, sort of, but the concept is elusive. It can mean different things to different people.

Consider these issues: Are compliments restricted to a consumer's verbal recognition of product/service superiority or affect ("This is a great product. I really love it"), or should expressions of appreciation be considered as compliments (Charles: "Fred, thank you so much for pointing out this possibility")? Can nonverbal behaviors that convey courtesy, respect or consideration also be construed as compliments (e.g., smiling, establishing eye contact, shaking hands, holding the door, patiently waiting)? What about subtle, casual remarks that signal recognition, respect or courtesy (e.g., remembering and using another person's name), or questions that may have a similar effect (e.g., "Is that made of genuine silk? May I touch it?")?

To what extent should the situational context of a comment or behavior be considered in one's definition? For example, when Coca Cola changed its formula in 1985 and began receiving thousands of letters and telephone calls from loyal

Coke drinkers protesting the change, were consumers simply complaining about the change or were they -- in effect -- complimenting Coca Cola on its original formula and how well the company and brand had established an emotional bond with generations of customers? Was the feedback a testament to consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction?

The answers to these questions are open to discussion, but ultimately compliments are what object-recipients think they are. They are subjectively perceived, and the recipients' interpretation may or may not correspond to what people bestowing the "compliments" intended.

P6: Compliments are largely a matter of perception.

A related issue is the relative potency of various types of compliments. Some compliments may be perceived as insincere or routinized to the point that they have no apparent impact or are not even considered a compliment by the receiver. Erving Goffman (1967) wrote that ritualistic elements of complimenting behavior occur in the maintenance of daily personal relationships. People understand that compliments are part of the "grease" that smooths transactions and thus should be discounted in terms of their objective meanings. In extreme cases, unwarranted praise becomes flattery delivered to "...obligate a target person who is committed to the distributive justice rule...to find ways to benefit the ingratiation" (Jones 1964). Of course some praise is expected, highly regarded, considered extraordinary and highly rewarding to the recipient.

P7: The potency of compliments is also subjectively perceived.

Identifying Compliments

All compliments may not be neatly typed letters of praise, and businesses should not expect compliments to be clearly labeled and fall in their laps. And, they should neither be expected to occur immediately at the time of a sale nor can

they be expected to be made to the service person responsible for the performance.

The following characterizes the difficulty of actually identifying compliments: In the mid-1990s one of the authors wrote a book length manuscript applying the team concept to the sport of bowling. Prior to publication, he sent preliminary drafts to several industry experts for comments. One recipient of the draft was an innovative proprietor of a chain of bowling centers on the west coast. He reviewed the manuscript carefully and left no doubt that he was an independent thinker -- offering several frank criticisms and suggestions without hesitation.

One of the earlier chapters in the book (one receiving virtually no comments by the frank reviewer) talked about the difference between a group and a team, with a team being something "more" than a group -- i.e., a team is more cohesive, is more likely to be focused on superordinate goals, and so on. About a year later, the author learned from another source that the harsh reviewer had changed the name of his company from "The Bowling Management Group" to "The Bowling Management Team."

About three years later the same critic invited the author to a planning retreat for the purpose of developing a long-range, ten year plan for his chain of bowling centers. The author considered the invitation itself to be a compliment, doubly so considering the proprietor's age, 82! Thus:

P8: Compliments can be very subtle and may go unrecognized.

Complex Objects of Compliments

Companies may receive consumer compliments on one or a combination of levels and this may make recognition of compliments even more difficult. The *company entity* itself is one level. For example, the faceless retailer may be complimented for extending its store hours, having a sale, tastefully redecorating the physical environment, or introducing a creative advertisement. An individual manager, department or another organization altogether

(e.g., ad agency) may be responsible for the action, but not knowing this, the consumer is likely to compliment the company or its figurehead. Routing these sorts of compliments to the individuals within the organization most responsible for the practices giving rise to the compliments would seem to be an obvious morale booster.

Inseparably intertwined with the company are its *products or brands*, which may be the most important category for marketers of tangible goods, since the products/brands are the focal points of the exchange relationships. In any business in which contact between customers and personnel is common, when the contact is frequently nonroutine in nature (e.g., encounters/products customized), or when the product is largely intangible (i.e., front-line workers are viewed *as* the products), *personnel* may be the object of the compliment. Finally, in many service businesses and retail store settings in which consumers congregate and share the physical environment, *other customers* might be the object of compliments. Still, in other instances, the *customer himself* might be the object of his own self-directed compliment, e.g., when the consumer pats himself on the back for being an astute shopper and finding such a great product, wonderful company, or terrific bargain. Therefore:

P9: The object(s) of consumer compliments can vary widely.

STEP 3: UNDERSTANDING COMPLIMENTS

Oliver (1997), as have others, noted the importance of firms encouraging consumers to complain so that the firm could not only prevent negative consumer reactions and the related implications for the loss of business, but also could take advantage of opportunities to create "secondary satisfaction" (with the complaint handling process) for the consumer. In addition, the firm could establish valuable communication with consumers at a time when they were primed

to receive a response from the firm to which they complained. Oliver also sees compliments as desirable indications that consumers are delighted (maybe extra-satisfied) with the firm's performance. While he suggests that compliments should be reinforced, he does not explore the additional implications of responding to consumer compliments. As mentioned above, consumers might sometimes have ulterior motives such as flattery for making compliments. As a result, the same type of responses to differently motivated compliments may not be appropriate. We propose that appropriate responses to compliments would require understanding of their motivation, an issue which may be more complicated than the understanding of consumer complaints.

P10: Compliments may be motivated for several reasons.

Motivations for Complimenting Behavior

Consumer complaining behavior is known to be influenced by a number of variables in addition to consumer dissatisfaction (Landon 1977). Landon's classic model of consumer complaining behavior, which has been extended in more comprehensive forms by writers such as Blodgett and Granbois (1992), proposed that complaining is a function of not only dissatisfaction, but also of the importance of the purchase, the expected benefits of complaining, and the personal characteristics of the consumer. More recently, Kowalski (1996) offered a model of complaining which while consistent with Landon and others, provided an explanation for complaining in the absence of dissatisfaction. We believe that the motivations for complimenting behavior are as complex as complaining behavior, if not more so.

Certainly, in a way analogous to complaining, similar compliments could result from a wide variety of causes. Also, compliments sometimes may occur in the absence of consumer satisfaction. Following a thorough literature review and inter-researcher and classroom "brainstorming" sessions we decided on a

complimenting model which is analogous to Landon's complaining model as it might be modified by the work of Kowalski:

$$\text{Complimenting Behavior} = f(\text{delight, expected benefits, involvement, social norms, and personal and situational factors})$$

This model allows for the phenomenon that complimenting behavior may be stimulated by consumer delight, but may occur even in cases of dissatisfaction. This much seems obvious: there is no one-to-one correspondence of complimenting behavior and motivations. Certainly we describe situations in which dissatisfied customers offer compliments. For example, if customers believe the business is trying hard and they wish to be encouraging rather than discouraging, or if they wish to avoid a confrontational or embarrassing situation. On the other hand, some largely satisfied customers may complain if they think they will profit. Ninety-nine percent of the product/service attributes may be considered "perfect," but the remaining one percent is noticeable enough to catch customers' attention and prompt reporting, but not problematic enough to threaten overall satisfaction. Furthermore, it seems likely that some customers may compliment *and* complain almost simultaneously, e.g., when contrasting one experience (expectations met) with another (expectations not met), when using a compliment as a weapon of civility to soften the blow of a complaint to follow ("You're very good, *but...*"), or when (dis)satisfaction hinges on multiple attributes or attitude objects ("Your employees are great, but your merchandise stinks").

Sometimes consumers express their gratitude in the form of compliments when they view personnel or businesses as deserving of such recognition, or because "it's the courteous thing to do." Or, compliments may be viewed simply as expressions of self-identity or as manifestations of one's involvement with the product/service or company. Consumer compliments may be used as interpersonal communication devices to establish rapport with customer-contact employees or even

with other customers in product owners groups. They may serve as investments in business relationships, with the expectation of reciprocal behavior, preferential treatment or some other sort of reward. Knowingly or unknowingly they may be used as a part of consumers' dissonance reduction efforts (i.e., circulating flattering comments about the product, personnel, company or the deal reinforces the wisdom of the purchase), or efforts to reduce possible company dissonance (i.e., to reinforce the company's commitment to the brand). When sentiments are mixed, compliments may be used as complaint buffers, i.e., to minimize the likelihood of a negative or defensive reaction to complaints, thereby increasing the likelihood that complaints will be addressed satisfactorily.

The variety of motivations that give rise to compliments magnifies the difficulty of truly understanding the complimenting consumer. The eventual conclusion may be that if you've seen *one* complimenting consumer, you've seen *one* complimenting consumer, not all of them! Nonetheless, a number of research questions sparked our interest: What are the primary motivations or underlying reasons giving rise to complimenting behavior? Are some consumers inclined to be more complimentary more frequently than are other consumers, and if so, are their motivations more altruistic than infrequent complimenters? Are their motivations consistent or do they vary across situations and consumer characteristics? Is complimenting behavior a form of coping, a natural consequence of one's ability to empathize with others, or a more general strand in our complex fabric of communication and interpersonal skills? Is complimenting a personality trait indicative of optimism, extroversion, character, or something else? Is it more often a gender thing, an age thing, a cultural thing, an education thing, or just an everyday garden variety thing equally likely to be found in anyone's back yard?

Of course, it would take a small army of consumer researchers years to answer these questions definitively, but we did launch a small pilot study to begin the investigation and garner a

few insights. Students in two sections of an undergraduate consumer behavior course were asked to complete an assignment for course credit.

An Exploratory Study

The authors conducted a small pilot study to examine the possibility of a wide number of motives for complimenting behavior and found some supporting evidence. As an outcome of the "brain-storming" sessions we hypothesized a set of motivations which we represented with a set of 22 Likert type statements of reasons for making compliments. Students administered these to a small sample of 31 consumers who had recently reported an instance of complimenting a business and who were asked to describe the complimenting situation. The Likert statements were as follows:

The company deserved the praise
 I was delighted with the product or service
 To encourage the company to continue the good work
 To be courteous
 To be a role model for other people
 To be a pleasant person
 To get rewarded with a gift
 To be recognized by the company
 To make myself feel better about the purchase
 To feel better about my own shopping ability
 To create a better relationship with the company
 To make the company more responsive to people like me
 To help other consumers by encouraging the company
 Because I identify with the company
 Because the company's success is important to me
 Because the product or service is very important to me
 Because the company tried so hard to serve me
 Because I'm a very positive person
 Because I identify with a brand the company makes

To soften a criticism I made in the same communication

I enjoy giving compliments to others

The company has a long record of good service to me

The resulting alpha coefficient for the set of items was .80, showing that the consumers responded to the items in a very consistent way, and suggesting that these statements captured the essence of an underlying construct, perhaps people's tendency to compliment when they believe it is appropriate. Although factor analysis was impossible because of the small sample size, an examination of the significant correlations of several of the items was quite interesting. For example:

1. "Delighted" was correlated only with "The company tried so hard to serve me." ($r=.58$)
2. "To get rewarded with a gift" was correlated ($r=.80$) with "To be recognized"; with "To make the company more responsive to me" ($r=.53$); with "Because the company's success is important to me" ($r=.53$); and with "I enjoy giving compliments" ($r=.52$)
3. "To feel better about the purchase" was correlated with "To create a better relationship with the company" ($r=.78$)
4. "To soften the criticism" was correlated with "To be a pleasant person" ($r=.36$); and with "To be a role model for other people" ($r=.47$)
5. "To encourage the company to continue the good work" was not significantly correlated with any of the other items.
6. The items "To make myself feel better about the purchase" and "To feel better about my shopping ability" were not correlated.

Although this analysis is only exploratory (with a larger sample of data now being collected) and based only on the inter-correlation of items from a small sample, it does seem to suggest that several dimensions might be needed to explain consumer complimenting. Delight appeared to be a separate dimension as did tangible rewards,

product/service importance and possibly personal involvement level. In addition, a reciprocity/ social norm variable seemed to materialize since items such as "To be a pleasant person," "To soften the criticism," and "To be a role model" were correlated.

STEP 4: ACTING ON COMPLIMENTS

Implications of Alternative Motivations for Complimenting

At an exploratory level, and consistent with our extended version of Landon's model, we have found some evidence that several different motivations may influence consumer complimenting behavior. The question then is what does this mean for the marketer? First,

Table 1

Motivation	Implication	Approach
Delight or great satisfaction	The consumer is open to an expansion of the relationship and has some degree of positive emotion active.	Suggest additional uses or accompanying services or products
Dissonance Reduction	The consumer needs reassurance.	Emphasize your quality control and advantages over non-chosen alternatives the customer had considered
Reciprocity/ Social Norms	The customer is sensitive and feels obligated to be interpersonally proper.	Stress customer contact person training and high quality acknowledgment of the compliment.
Improve Relationship with a Service Person	Need to maintain low staff turnover with care to reward the employees who excel at customer relations.	Consider feasibility of assigning customer service reps, setting appointments, etc..
High Involvement with Product or Service	Word-of-mouth by customer is very likely	Consider any means of encouragement
Voting Behavior to continue special services or products	Might be true for niche products or services.	Consider needed segment size for loyal users.
To Buffer Complaints & Increase Effectiveness	Consumer feels the need to improve receptivity to an accompanying complaint	Make certain the costs of complaining are not too high and that customer contact people do not impose these on consumers with defensive responses
Flattery: To get a Tangible Reward	Actual flattery or ingratiation attempted to gain undeserved reward	Attempts to avoid any such "rip-off" behavior would be counter-productive...treat as a necessary cost of business

business responses to compliments may vary in effectiveness depending upon the reasons for which the compliments were made. Related to this is the need to personalize standard company responses to make them as effective at building profitable relationships as is possible. For example, if it were possible to classify the operative consumer complimenting motivations in each case, a firm might be able to consider the possible response scenarios suggested in Table 1. The "catch" from a managerial view, however, is that it is not *yet* possible to know exactly what motives or combination of motives actually produced the compliments.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Compared to consumer complaining behavior, consumer researchers (and probably marketing practitioners as well) have devoted very little attention to the notion of consumer or customer compliments. Yet, compliments are a legitimate form of feedback – potentially more effective than complaints, and quite likely a form that consumers would prefer to proffer. We propose that a simple four step process can be useful to both academic consumer researchers and marketing practitioners: Step 1: Encourage compliments. Step 2: Recognize compliments. Step 3: Understand compliments. Step 4: Act on compliments.

In this paper, we have used existing consumer research and theory, especially as it pertains to consumer (dis)satisfaction and complaining behavior, as a springboard, of sorts, to examine several relevant issues pertaining to consumer compliments, complimenting behavior, and motivations for compliments. We also found the more general behavior modification literature to be illuminating – especially in support of our proposition that compliments (as a form of rewards) may be more influential in shaping customer-contact personnel's behavior than complaints (punishments).

At times in our modest quest to understand compliments, we found complaint and compliment issues to be similar or closely related phenomena, much like two sides of the same coin.

At the same time we realize that complaining and complimenting seem to stake out different terrain, perhaps with complaining more likely triggered by consumer dissatisfaction and the desire for compensation and complimenting more likely triggered by the need to follow social norms and achieve personal psychological adjustments. As we continue our research efforts, we hope to unravel and further elaborate on these curious relationships between complaints and compliments, but for now we would simply warn others to avoid unwarranted assumptions about compliments and making precarious inferential leaps from complaints to compliments. Complaints and compliments may live in the same forest and share some of the same food sources, but they are different animals in many respects.

Although we employed a few mixed metaphors in our discussion, we also articulated ten propositions we believe to be relevant to the understanding of consumer compliments and related motivations and behaviors:

P1: Consumer silence is not necessarily indicative of satisfaction. A business can not know if its customers are satisfied unless they inform the business accordingly.

P2: Just as complaints don't always accompany dissatisfaction, compliments don't always accompany satisfaction.

P3: Compliments, like complaints, may be heard by many.

P4: It may not be the customer's *job* to train front-line employees, but it is her/her *opportunity*.

P5: Consumer compliments are more likely to influence business behavior (including behavior of individual employees) than are consumer complaints.

P6: Compliments are largely a matter of perception.

P7: The potency of compliments is also subjectively perceived.

P8: Compliments can be very subtle and may go without being recognized.

P9: The object(s) of consumer compliments can vary widely.

P10: Compliments may be motivated for several reasons.

Further, we elaborated on P10, offering preliminary findings from a pilot study in support of an extension of Landon's (1977) model, i.e.:

Complimenting Behavior = f(delight, expected benefits, involvement, social norms, and personal and situational factors)

Depending upon consumers' motivations for offering complimentary feedback, some company responses may be more appropriate than others. We briefly outlined some of these possibilities to show both the potential business implications of understanding consumer motivations for complimenting behavior as well as to motivate consumer researchers to further develop and explore this line of inquiry.

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