

# THE EFFECT OF INTENSITY OF DISSATISFACTION ON COMPLAINING BEHAVIOUR

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has found that customers take actions, such as complain or engage in negative word of mouth behaviour, or take no action, such as never use the organisation again, based upon attitude to complaining, level of importance of the product or the nature of the problem for example. This paper seeks to extend the work on responses to dissatisfying situations by investigating the type and number of responses made against the intensity of dissatisfaction felt by the customer. Existing research has speculated about this relationship though little empirical evidence has been reported. This exploratory study is based on a convenience sample of 100 individuals who reported intensity of dissatisfaction and actions taken (rather than intentions) to dissatisfying service situations. A clear relationship is found between intensity of dissatisfaction and customer responses in terms of the types of action, the number of actions and the numbers of people told about the dissatisfying incident.

## INTRODUCTION

Customers' dissatisfaction with goods and services is known to have a significant negative impact on brand loyalty and repurchase intentions (Etzel and Silverman 1981, Day 1984, TARP 1986, Singh 1990) and on the organisation's costs (Anderson et al 1994). It is important therefore that researchers and managers understand the relationship between dissatisfaction and consumer complaint behaviour (CCB). Yet the literature provides us with only limited understanding of the psychological processes that create satisfaction and dissatisfaction and yields limited information about precisely what customers might do as a result of being dissatisfied (Oliver 1997).

Several studies have attempted to identify the factors which influence the customers' responses. These antecedents of CCB include for example, the perceived likelihood of successful redress, customers' attitude to complaining, or demographics (see for example Blodgett et al

1993, Day 1984, Landon 1977, Oliver 1997). One variable that seems to have been neglected in the CCB research is the intensity of dissatisfaction felt by the customer. Whilst there has been some speculation about its relationship to CCB little empirical evidence has been reported.

This paper sets out to undertake an exploratory study to assess the relationship between customer responses and intensity of dissatisfaction. Before providing details of the study, this paper argues firstly for conducting CCB research using a wide range of responses to failure situations, secondly for treating dissatisfaction as a variable rather than a two state construct, and, thirdly it reviews the existing literature which links responses to intensity of dissatisfaction.

## CONSUMER RESPONSES TO DISSATISFACTION

Prakash (1991) has criticised CCB research for developing simplistic uni-dimensional categorisations of customer responses to failure situations "While much of the conceptual research has suggested that CCB is a multi-dimensional construct, most of the empirical research has treated it as a uni-dimensional construct". (The word "responses" is used here rather than "actions" as some reactions to dissatisfaction may be in-action, such as not using the organisation again, or negative action such as negative word of mouth communication (Singh 1990).)

Examples of such uni-dimensional constructs include complain or not complain, action or no action (see for example Warland et al 1975, Morganosky and Buckley 1986). Two dimensional categorisations, however, have also been used, for example, complain or do nothing (Oliver 1997), exit or complain (Hirschman 1970, Best and Andreasen 1977). Singh (1988) went further and identified three categories of responses; voice (a verbal response directed towards a person involved in providing the service), private (negative word of mouth communication and non-use of the organisation) and third party (complain to third parties not directly involved in the service itself, such as formal or regulatory agencies or

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newspapers). Singh went on to test these three categories which have been used and supported by other researchers (see for example Maute and Forrester 1993). In 1990 Singh also categorised four types of complainants; passives (people who tend to take little action, voicers (those who tend to actively complain to the service provider), irates (those people who tend to employ private responses) and activists (those with a tendency to not only complain on all three other ways but also complain to third parties).

Although most of the studies are based on a variety of responses to failure situations there seems to have been a compelling urge by many authors to compress the number of possible customer responses into a small number of broad categories. Warland et al (1975) for example identified 12 types of action from do nothing to contact a lawyer, which they reduced to two categories. Singh (1990) used ten response items based on 15 items found in the literature, from forget about the incident or do nothing through to take some legal action, which he reduced to three categories.

Whilst there appears to be agreement that customers can and do engage in varied and multiple responses (see for example Davidow and Uttal 1989, Singh 1990, Prakash 1991) this reductionist approach has several disadvantages. It loses much of the richness of the customer's responses. It limits the predictive value of the relationships found. And, importantly for this paper, it makes it difficult for managers and researchers to assess the implications of graded or escalating responses to consumer dissatisfaction.

Singh (1988) concluded that "researchers might find it advantageous to operationalise the CCB construct at the level of its individual dimensions" and that higher levels of explanation and prediction may be achieved through the operationalisation of CCB as a multi-dimensional construct.

## DISSATISFACTION

Much of the work to date has also treated (dis)satisfaction as a two state construct, for example upset or not upset (Warland et al 1975), satisfied or dissatisfied (Day 1980). Prakash (1991) argued that dissatisfaction should be seen as

a variable of changing intensity. He suggested that it might be better to conceive of dissatisfaction in terms of levels or degrees of dissatisfaction. Maute and Forrester (1993) included magnitude of dissatisfaction in their study but it is unclear how the levels of dissatisfaction were operationalised except as a dichotomous construct, low dissatisfaction and high dissatisfaction. Bell and Zemke (1987) attempted to categorise levels of dissatisfaction and suggested that customers' feelings about service failures/breakdowns fall into two distinct levels of dissatisfaction which they categorised into 'annoyance' and 'victimisation'. Annoyed customers, they suggested, feel inconvenienced as the result of an experience (failure) that was slightly less than expected. A victimised customer is left with a major feeling of 'ire, frustration or pain', dependant (on the service provider) and angry. They suggested that victimised customers need to be dealt with differently to annoyed customers. Sinha (1993) describes three levels of dissatisfaction, customers who are unhappy or inconvenienced, grippers and grumblers and people who are enraged.

One of the most recent works thoroughly exploring the concept of satisfaction sheds little light on this issue. Oliver (1997) tends to use satisfaction as a two state response to the consumption of a product or service, but he also implies that it is a variable, indeed he talks about "the level of dissatisfaction" (page 20). He suggested that delight ("an expression of very high satisfaction") is an extreme expression of positive effect and disappointment a mild expression of negative effect. (It is interesting to note that he links emotions to different levels of satisfaction.) The level of (dis)satisfaction, he claimed, affects the customer's attitude to the product or service, but he does not provide more details as to what those levels might be.

Although there appears to be an emerging, though implicit, consensus that dissatisfaction is a variable there is little agreement as to what constitutes the points on the scale. Prakash (1991) suggested that researchers need to study the multi-dimensionality of dissatisfaction rather than treating it as the bipolar end of satisfaction and concluded that "This is a vast open area for research".

## LINKING INTENSITY OF DISSATISFACTION TO CUSTOMER RESPONSES

This study is concerned with linking consumer responses to the intensity or levels of dissatisfaction. The idea is not new, indeed the first model proposing such a relationship was put forward by Landon in 1977. Little empirical work has followed. Prakash (1991) confirmed that the variable of intensity of dissatisfaction has not been included in studies as an independent variable and indeed that the "importance of dissatisfaction (has been) de-emphasised". Prakash (1991) went on to speculate about the relationship between the intensity of dissatisfaction and customer responses to a failure situation though he did not provide any empirical evidence.

Day (1980), on the other hand, maintained that the intensity of dissatisfaction has little value in predicting CCB outcomes implying that dissatisfaction is more of a trigger. He suggested that the nature of consumer responses is related to other factors, such as the importance of the event, customers knowledge, difficulty in seeking redress and chances of success, and demographics, lifestyle and customer values (see also Morganosky and Buckley 1986). Day (1984) maintained that evidence about the relationship between intensity of dissatisfaction and complaining behaviour is weak. It is possible that one reason for this might be that the studies in question did not attempt to use dissatisfaction as a independent variable but as one of several intervening or moderating elements in the CCB process.

More recent research has suggested that intensity of dissatisfaction may indeed have a direct effect on the customer's responses to a failure situation. Richins (1983) using severity of the problem as a surrogate for intensity of dissatisfaction found a direct relationship between intensity and complaining behaviour. Maute and Forrester (1993) concluded that the magnitude of dissatisfaction appears to be a predictor of complaining behaviour. Sinha (1993) postulated that there are links between levels of dissatisfaction and responses "... all businesses have to deal with dissatisfied customers. Such customers, however, can range from those who are simply unhappy or inconvenienced, to gripers and grumblers, to those

who are enraged, developing life-long grudges, seeking punitive action in court, or, worst of all, considering life-threatening revenge."

Prakash (1991) claimed that, while there seems to be consensus among many researchers that the intensity of dissatisfaction might be positively related to CCB, most of the work has focused on the antecedents of CCB such as attitude, expectancy value, prior experience, alienation, demographics, likelihood of successful redress, customers' attitude to complaining or the controllability of the problems, or the customers' post-complaint perception of justice (see for example Blodgett et al 1993, Day 1984, Landon 1977, Oliver 1997).

### THE STUDY

This study attempts to undertake an exploratory test of the relationship between the intensity of dissatisfaction and customer responses to dissatisfying situations in order to make a small contribution to the debate on consumer responses to failure situations.

H1 The number and types of responses made by a dissatisfied customer is proportional to the intensity of the dissatisfaction

It is suggested that the more dissatisfied a customer is, the more likely s/he is to complain, to tell friends and acquaintances, to avoid using the service again and even dissuade others from using it, for example. It is suggested that mildly dissatisfied customers will initiate only a small number of responses to a failure situation unlike highly aggrieved customers who will undertake all possible responses. It is further suggested that mildly dissatisfied customers will invoke less severe responses, such as complain, whereas more dissatisfied customers will take more severe action such as actively discouraging other people from using the organisation or taking legal action for example.

H1a The intensity of dissatisfaction is directly linked to the numbers of friends and acquaintances told about the incident

One often quoted "statistic" suggests that

dissatisfied customers tell on average ten others. The TARP study (1986) for example, found that dissatisfied customers told on average nine others about their negative experience. It is suggested that the numbers told will be a function of the intensity of dissatisfaction, i.e. mildly dissatisfied customers will tell few people, highly dissatisfied customers will tell many.

Services were chosen as the focus of this study because there is a view that services can entail greater dissatisfaction than products and few studies have investigated service dissatisfaction (Singh 1990). A convenience sample of 100 individuals was chosen from the author's friends, acquaintances and colleagues, to reflect a mix of sexes and ages from 18 to 55.

Following a verbal invitation and explanation, respondents were asked to recall a recent dissatisfying experience with a service. They were provided with a simple questionnaire which asked them to "think of a time when you were dissatisfied with the level of service you received". This question allowed individuals to self select a real experience. The disadvantage of this approach might be that customers only report the more dissatisfying experiences as these may be the more memorable.

The respondents were asked to identify the type of organisation that was involved and describe in a paragraph or so what went wrong. The questionnaire asked them to identify their level of dissatisfaction at the time. Respondents were asked to report their responses following this experience. This approach has the important advantage of identifying actions taken rather than intentions which have been the focus of most studies to date, a criticism made by Singh (1988) and Prakash (1991).

Since operationalised and tested levels of dissatisfaction levels are not available in the CCB literature, these were developed in discussion with 42 executive MBA students. Initially a Likert type scale showing dissatisfaction ranging from not at all dissatisfied to extremely dissatisfied was proposed but the students found these to be unhelpful and preferred the levels described in terms of emotional outcomes. Much of the literature assumes a close relationship between levels of dissatisfaction and emotion. Oliver (1997) for example defines "delight" as "an

expression of very high satisfaction" and disappointment a mild expression of negative effect. Though he also suggested that the relationship between satisfaction and emotions is unclear, he accepts that they are closely related. Such emotional prototypes for satisfaction and dissatisfaction have been used in other studies (summarised in Oliver 1997). Oliver claimed that descriptors for "dissatisfaction (are) not so easy to pin down" but they could include anger, annoyance, frustration and hostility.

The final agreed descriptors for levels of dissatisfaction were a combination of dissatisfaction level and emotional outcomes:-

not at all dissatisfied  
slightly dissatisfied  
annoyed  
very annoyed  
extremely annoyed  
absolutely furious

The responses included in the questionnaire were based upon a set of ten pre-tested items gathered from the literature by Singh 1988. These were again tested with students. The final set of responses included were:

ignore the incident (i.e. no response/do nothing)  
tell friends or acquaintances  
complain to the organisation  
"make a fuss" with the organisation  
decide never to use the organisation again  
actively dissuade friends from using the service  
decide actively to campaign against the organisation (explain how)  
other (explain)

The "make a fuss" option was included after a small pilot study revealed, after discussion with respondents, that "to complain" was interpreted as making an official complaint to the organisation or a member of staff, i.e. "I wish to complain about ...". Several respondents explained that they did not complain as such but "made a bit of a fuss" to bring the situation to the attention of a member of staff, though not complaining per se, i.e. "I'm not complaining but ...".

Those respondents ticking the "tell friends or acquaintances" box were asked to estimate how many people they had told about the experience. The respondents were also requested to say if the organisation did anything to recover them, if so what and how they felt as a result. Respondents were invited to tick more than one box.

### THE RESULTS

In previous studies much analytical work has been associated with assessing the validity of various categorisation schemes. The intention of this paper is not to validate or create such broad classifications but to assess actions taken (without further classification) against the intensity of dissatisfaction reported. Simple but powerful graphical representations of the data are provided.

Seventy seven useable questionnaires were returned. Three questionnaires which had the "not at all dissatisfied" box ticked were discarded on the basis that they were not dissatisfied customers.

Customers tended to report the more dissatisfying incidents, only six reported incidents as being slightly dissatisfying, see table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Number of Respondents and Level of Dissatisfaction Reported**

Level of dissatisfaction	Number of respondents
Slightly dissatisfied	6
Annoyed	11
Very annoyed	23
Extremely annoyed	17
Absolutely furious	20
Total	77

To check if the sample was biased towards "small or large ticket" items, the responses were categorised into services estimated at over £200 in value ("big ticket" items such as car dealerships, head-hunting services and international flights) and services estimated at less than £200 ("small ticket" items such as restaurant meals, taxi services, and car maintenance). Table 2 shows that there was a fairly equal spread of low and high priced services in each of the categories.

**Table 2**  
**Estimated Value of the Service Reported**

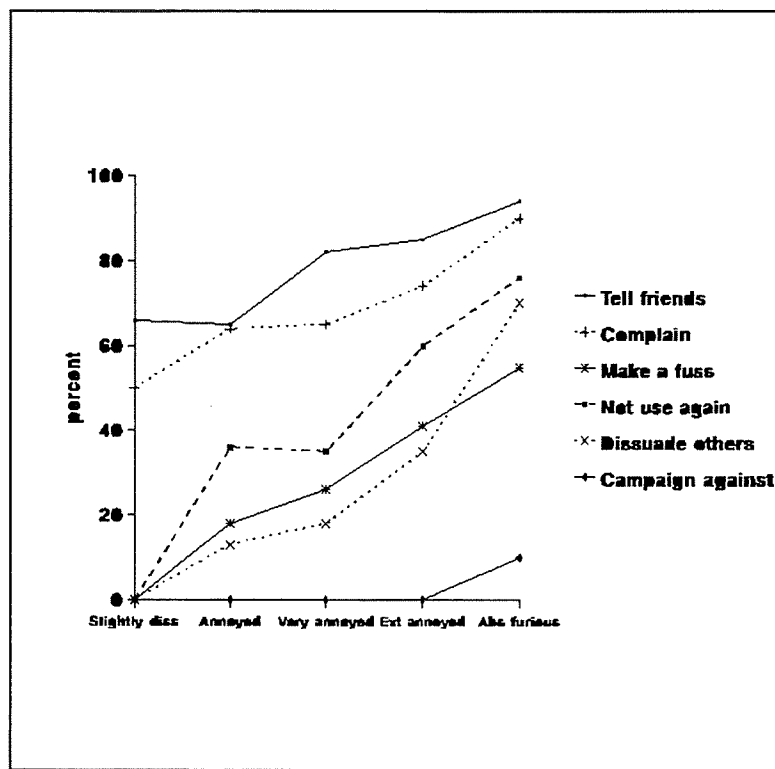
Level of dissatisfaction	Small ticket items	Big ticket items
Slightly dissatisfied	4	2
Annoyed	6	5
Very annoyed	12	11
Extremely annoyed	9	8
Absolutely furious	10	10

Figure 1 summarises in graphical form the main results of the survey by depicting the actions taken, in per cent, for each level of dissatisfaction. For example, out of the six slightly dissatisfied customers, four (66%) told friends and acquaintances about the incident and three (50%) complained to the organisation. No other actions were reported for this level of dissatisfaction. No respondent completed the "other action" line on the questionnaire, suggesting that the list of actions provided captured the key actions taken.

The findings display construct validity and behave as expected. However, a chi-squared contingency test was applied to ascertain the significance of the relationships between the actions and the level of dissatisfaction. Because of the small number of responses in some categories, some of them were merged with their adjacent categories. The null hypothesis that there is no relationship between intensity of dissatisfaction and numbers taking each action was rejected at the one per cent level for telling friends and acquaintances, actively dissuade others, and campaign against. The null hypothesis was rejected at the five per cent level for make a fuss and not use again. The null hypothesis was accepted for the complain category.

The average numbers of friends and acquaintances told about the dissatisfying incidents are shown in Figure 2. It should be noted that the higher the levels of dissatisfaction the more understated is the average. At the lower levels of dissatisfaction respondents were quite specific about the number of people they had told, however

Figure 1  
Actions Taken for Different Levels of Dissatisfaction



at the higher levels several respondents reported telling 15+ or 40+ friends and acquaintances. The figures given (i.e. 15 or 40) were used to calculate the average.

### DISCUSSION

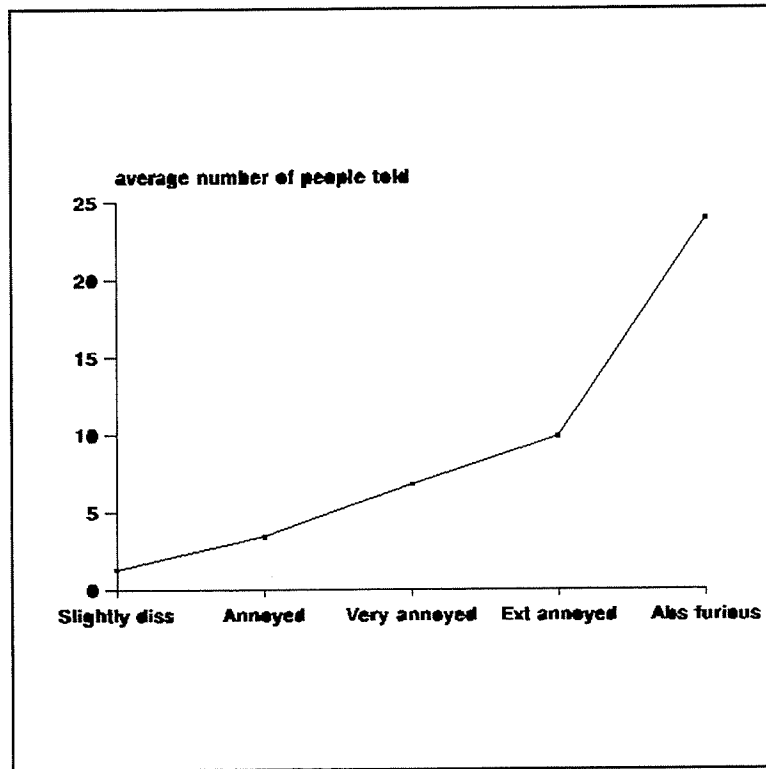
Figure 1 confirms the study's main hypothesis that the number and types of responses made by a dissatisfied customer will be proportional to the intensity of the dissatisfaction with the execution of complaining which appears not to be significantly sensitive to the intensity of dissatisfaction. Every single respondent reported taking some action in response to a dissatisfying situation. The numbers of actions taken increased with each level of dissatisfaction, from an average of about two actions per slightly annoyed customer to just under four actions per absolutely furious customer. Furthermore the severity of action increased. The likelihood of not using the service again or actively

dissuading other people from using the service rises sharply with the intensity of dissatisfaction.

It is interesting to note that large numbers of only slightly dissatisfied customers were willing to take action. Although they were not willing to make a fuss at the time, and were prepared to use the service again, about half said they did tell friends and acquaintances (66%) and made a formal complaint (50%). This finding is in marked contrast to other studies (for example the TARP study 1986) which suggest that the majority of customers do not complain. On the contrary this study would suggest that the vast majority of dissatisfied customers do complain, from 50 per cent of the slightly dissatisfied customers rising to 90 per cent of the absolutely furious customers.

The majority (85%) of the absolutely furious customers told other people about the incident. Nearly all of them (90%) made a formal complaint and 55 per cent made a fuss during the service. They also took action against the organisation with

**Figure 2**  
**Average Number of People Told for Different**  
**Levels of Dissatisfaction**



**Table 3**

Level of dissatisfaction	Available for recovery	Made a fuss	Complained	Both
Slightly dissatisfied	50	0	50	0
Annoyed	82	18	64	0
Very annoyed	74	26	65	17
Extremely annoyed	71	41	74	35
Absolutely furious	100	55	90	45

70 per cent of them (compared with 35 per cent of extremely annoyed customers) actively dissuading other people from using the organisation or its services. A small number, ten per cent, were prepared to go even further and actively

campaigned against the organisation, by taking out high profile legal action or petitioning outside the organisation involved.

It is important to note that the vast majority of customers made themselves available for recovery

by either making a fuss or formally complaining, or both. Table 3 summarises the percentage of respondents who made themselves available for recovery.

Fifty per cent of the slightly dissatisfied customers made themselves available for recovery by making a fuss or complaining. This rose to all the customers in the absolutely furious category making themselves known to the organisation. Clearly the majority of customers complain, in some form or other, and by doing so make themselves available for recovery. Interestingly, in the less severe cases customers tend either to complain or make a fuss, suggesting that organisations should take both equally seriously.

Figure 2 confirms the secondary hypothesis that the intensity of dissatisfaction is directly linked to the numbers of friends and acquaintances told about the incident. The numbers told rises steadily from an average of just over one in the slightly dissatisfied category to an understated average of about ten in the extremely annoyed category. This then rises sharply for the respondents who felt absolutely furious who told an understated average of over 20 people each. Interestingly the average number of people told overall is 10.1!

The number of respondents telling others also rose with the intensity of dissatisfaction. Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents in each category who reported that they told other people about the incident.

**Table 4**  
**Percentage of Respondents Who Told Other People about the Incident**

Level of dissatisfaction	Percentage of respondents who told other people
Slightly dissatisfied	33
Annoyed	54
Very annoyed	69
Extremely annoyed	88
Absolutely furious	90

## CONCLUSION

The study's findings need to be seen in the light of the limitations of this work. It was carried out using untested levels of dissatisfaction, though it did use a wide range of responses and collected actions rather than intentions. The sample size was very small and much greater numbers are required before any certainty could be attached to the findings.

Despite these limitations, this study has provided evidence of a strong relationship between intensity of dissatisfaction and customers' responses. It has demonstrated that the greater the intensity of dissatisfaction the more likely are customers to take "action". It has also shown that the majority of customers complain in some form or other. Eighty per cent of dissatisfied customers made themselves available for recovery by drawing the situation to the attention of staff at the time or by formally complaining.

It was found that on average 48 per cent of dissatisfied customers will not use the service again and 32 per cent will actively discourage others from using the organisation in the future. The likelihood of these responses increased with the level of dissatisfaction. Just over two per cent of dissatisfied customers will take extreme action though these are limited to the absolutely furious group. It has also been shown that on average each dissatisfied customer will tell 10 others, not a surprising finding in itself, but again the numbers told rise dramatically with the level of dissatisfaction suggesting that organisations do need to take rapid action to deal with problems before dissatisfaction escalates.

Dissatisfied customers are like a time bomb (Davidow and Uttal 1989). They can rapidly undo all the good created by large marketing budgets by spreading not only bad news but also actively mis-marketing the organisation and its services.

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