

AN EXPLORATORY CHARACTERIZATION OF CONSUMER SUGGESTION SHARING: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Firms can learn valuable customer knowledge by engaging with customers who share their suggestion ideas. Yet consumer suggestion sharing has been minimally studied and remains poorly distinguished from complaint behavior. This research reviews suggestion-sharing related literature, theoretically distinguishes suggestion sharing behavior from complaint behavior and offers an exploratory empirical characterization of direct-to-firm consumer suggestion sharing. The empirical findings draw on seven surveys employing three different elicitation techniques – critical incident, direct reporting, and scenario response. Results indicate that approximately 70% of consumers share suggestions with firms each year and that the majority are unsolicited and are shared face to face in services contexts, highlighting the need for companies to establish frontline service processes both to capture and communicate shared insights and to better engage with customers seeking to help them. Further, consumers conceive of more than twice as many suggestion ideas as they share, highlighting the potential for companies to garner substantially more improvement ideas and feedback, and to develop stronger customer relationships, by fostering increased sharing of suggestion ideas.

Keywords

Customer suggestion sharing, idea sharing, customer voice, customer participation, customer engagement, customer citizenship, consumer complaints

INTRODUCTION

Customer complaints are commonly viewed as ‘gifts,’ imparting valuable information to the company (Barlow & Møller, 1996; Kasouf, Celuch, & Strieter, 1995). Over the past four decades researchers have studied complaint behavior extensively, both theoretically (cf. Stephens & Gwinner, 1998) and empirically (cf. Day, 1980; Ford, Scheffman, & Weiskopf, 2004; Jacoby & Jaccard, 1981; Umashankar, Ward, & Dahl, 2017). In this article, we argue that a related, but distinct, type of firm-directed voice, *consumer suggestion sharing*, warrants similar attention, and we present a theoretical and exploratory empirical characterization of suggestion sharing behavior.

Customer suggestions are ideas offered to companies for improving their products or

services (McColl-Kennedy, Zaki, Lemon, Urmetzer, & Neely, 2019; Villarroel Ordenes, Theodoulidis, Burton, Gruber, & Zaki, 2014). Suggestions can raise unconsidered new offering possibilities—such as a newly popular drink that a grocer might carry—and identify ways that an offering might be modified to better serve customers—such as how the signage at a fast-food restaurant could better convey how customers should engage in the servicescape (Bitner, 1992). Whether the shared ideas prove useful or not, suggestions provide companies with valuable input from the customers’ perspective, leading Kumar and Pansari (2016) to argue that customer suggestions are essential for achieving ‘customer knowledge’.

Somewhat surprisingly, research focusing on customer suggestions remains scarce. Despite widespread references to suggestion-sharing behavior in the flourishing literature on customer engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; van Doorn et al., 2010), customer co-creation (Hoyer, Chandy, Dorotic, Krafft, & Singh, 2010), customer participation (Bettencourt, 1997; Chan, Yim, & Lam, 2010; Dong & Sivakumar, 2017), and customer citizenship behavior (Celuch, Walz, & Hartman, 2018; Choi & Hwang, 2019; Groth, 2005) there is limited research explicitly characterizing or measuring consumer suggestion-sharing behavior. The current research fulfills a significant gap by being the first to explicitly focus its efforts on understanding customer suggestion sharing behavior. Specifically, this research focuses on direct-to-firm consumer suggestion sharing—that is, on consumers sharing suggestion ideas directly with companies. To provide context we start with a review of suggestion-sharing related literatures. Next, we theoretically characterize suggestion sharing by contrasting it consumer complaint behavior. Finally, drawing on results from seven surveys employing three different elicitation techniques we present an exploratory empirical characterization of consumer suggestion sharing behavior.

Our theoretical analysis shows that, while both suggestion sharing and complaint behavior involve firm-directed communications regarding a ‘deficiency,’ suggestion sharing can be distinguished in a variety of ways that have important implications for their solicitation and management. Our empirical results indicate that approximately 70% of respondents have shared at least one suggestion with a firm in the past year, that the majority of these suggestions are unsolicited, and that most are shared face-to-face in services contexts. However, consumers conceive of more than twice as many suggestion ideas as they share, highlighting the potential for companies to garner substantially more improvement ideas and to develop stronger customer relationships by fostering increased suggestion sharing.

Suggestion-Sharing Related Literature

Though no observed research focuses on suggestion sharing, various literature streams

address customer suggestion-sharing related topics, and thus help to frame the behavior and what is known about it. We begin by briefly reviewing these.

Customer Co-Creation, Engagement and Participation

Suggestion sharing is commonly mentioned in research regarding voluntary customer contributions to value-creation and firm productivity. For example, the co-creation literature depicts customer suggestions as an input to the ideation stage of new product development (Hoyer et al., 2010). Likewise, the customer participation literature describes suggestions as one element of the “effort, preference, knowledge, or other inputs” that customers contribute to producing and delivering a service (Bettencourt, 1997; Chan et al., 2010). The customer engagement literature refers to suggestions as one of the ‘knowledge sharing’ elements of a broad set of “consumers’ positively-valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities during, or related to, focal consumer/brand interactions” (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014), or, more generally, calls them “voluntary resource contributions” (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). Finally, the literature on customer citizenship behavior views suggestion sharing as an important, helpful, extra-role, discretionary behavior among others that include advocacy, providing recommendations, helping customers, tolerance, and providing feedback in general (Groth, 2005; Yi & Gong, 2013).

The common invocation of consumer suggestion sharing behavior in all of these streams belies the fact that such research, rather than carefully distinguishing suggestion sharing from other proactive, firm-helping customer behaviors, considers it as merely one element of formative constructs that include behaviors as diverse as sharing positive word of mouth and assisting other customers. As such, while the literature on customer co-creation, engagement, participation and citizenship behavior raises the visibility of, and, concurrently, substantiates the importance of, customer suggestion sharing behavior, it provides limited insight into its

distinct nature, its prevalence, or how to manage it.

Customers as Knowledge Resources

A well-established ‘customers as resources’ literature substantiates the importance of customer knowledge sharing for product development and service enhancement (Chang & Taylor, 2016; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Kristensson, Gustafsson, & Archer, 2004; Nambisan & Baron, 2007). In particular, the value of customer input has been studied in the context of customer participation in product development (see Chang & Taylor, 2016, for a meta-analysis) and in the context of customer idea sharing in online communities (Nambisan & Baron, 2009). Customer ‘participation’ in new product ideation has been shown to result in faster new product time-to-market and improved financial outcomes (Chang & Taylor, 2016), while ordinary consumers have been shown to come up with more original and valuable ideas than experts (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008; Kristensson et al., 2004). Some customers readily share their knowledge and ideas in online platforms and communities, motivated by a desire to exhibit their product related knowledge and problem solving skills (Nambisan & Baron, 2009) and to strengthen their ties with relevant others (Akman, Plewa, & Conduit, 2018; Mathwick & Mosteller, 2017; Nambisan & Baron, 2009).

The ‘customers as resources’ literature demonstrates the value of customer idea sharing for firms and hints at its prevalence in certain contexts. However, it focuses on customer contributions via formal market research or active participation by highly involved customers in communities where the interactive social context, and social impression management, motivate and guide their participation (Berger, 2014).

The Effect of Knowledge Sharing on Customers

Next, we turn to literature regarding the impact of knowledge sharing, and in particular, the positive impact of customer knowledge sharing on customer satisfaction, relationship strength and related relational outcomes. Chan, Yim and Lam (2010) illustrate how customer participation—defined as the extent to which customers provide/share information, make suggestions,

and become involved in decision making—creates economic and relational value for the customer, thereby increasing customer satisfaction. Their work highlights how participation generates more satisfying customer outcomes by helping to guarantee outcome quality, enabling higher levels of customization, and augmenting the customers’ sense of control over the process and outcomes. Perhaps more impressively, Liu and Gal (2011) find that merely sharing advice can lead to an enhanced sense of relational closeness with firms, and that this closeness can spur increased subsequent transactions. Thus, by inducing an empathetic perspective, customer efforts to help firms can foster stronger, more valuable relationships.

Eisingerich, Auh and Merlo (2014) explain knowledge-sharing participation as reciprocal relational behavior spurred by satisfaction with a firm’s offerings. In this manner, customer participation—in the form of providing feedback and suggestions—can translate customer satisfaction into increased sales by strengthening the ties between a firm and its customers. In line with Liu and Gal (2011), Eisingerich and colleagues find that the act of engaging in such relational behavior deepens the links between the customer and the firm, leading the customer to “feel more closely integrated into the brand” (p. 43), and that the relational ‘stickiness’ created by such bonds is more effective than satisfaction in terms of increasing customer willingness to pay and resilience to failures. Further, relational communication facilitates cross-selling and allows firms to better satisfy customers by better addressing their articulated needs.

In sum, ample research supports the contention that, independent of any value in the information provided, increased customer suggestion sharing has beneficial effects on customer attitudes and firm outcomes.

Handling, and Learning from, Firm-Directed Voice

The literatures reviewed above imply that customer suggestion sharing is an important component of firm-directed engagement behavior, that it can contribute valuable ideas to firms, and that it can lead to stronger customer-firm relationships and positive sales outcomes.

Yet, despite this, limited research directly addresses how firms should handle and learn from customer suggestions (see the discussion on gently rejecting customer-submitted ideas in Fombelle, Bone, & Lemon, 2016, for a rare exception). Instead, research regarding handling and learning from firm-directed voice has largely focused on customer complaint management.

Complaint management has been shown to be an important defensive tool that can decrease the costs of offensive marketing (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987). Indeed, Fornell and Wernerfelt conclude that complaint behavior should not be minimized, but rather strategically embraced. That said, negative managerial views of interacting with complaining customers can lead to limited consumer access to complaint expression opportunities and undermine customer satisfying compensation policies (Hansen, Wilke, & Zaichkowsky, 2009).

The complaint management literature has largely focused on understanding how customer perceptions of justice—and more specifically, distributive, procedural, and interactional justice—influence post-complaint satisfaction (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011b; Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002; Orsingher, Valentini, & de Angelis, 2010). This focus is not surprising given the centrality of consumers' goals for post-failure redress in complaint behavior (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). However, as redress is not a goal of suggestion sharing, justice-based models are unlikely to be applicable for suggestion management. More related to our understanding of suggestion handling, Van Vaerenburg et al. (2012) build on the discovery that some customers complain with the goal of helping other customers (Johnston & Michel, 2008) and show that 'process recovery communications'—that is, company communications regarding process improvements derived from customer complaints—can significantly improve overall post-complaint satisfaction.

Overall, customer complaint behavior has a negative impact on service employees and their organizational commitment (Bell & Luddington, 2006; Bell, Menguc, & Stefani, 2004), and employees are disinclined to report negative feedback, especially when it is used for

evaluative purposes (Wirtz, Tambyah, & Mattila, 2010). Similarly, customer participation in the form of information sharing and involvement in service production decision making can increase employee job stress (Chan et al., 2010). That said, employees who perceive self and other (customer) efficacy can enjoy customer participation, leading to enhanced job satisfaction (Yim, Chan, & Lam, 2012), and employees are more inclined to report customer feedback that is clearly intended for service improvement purposes (Wirtz et al., 2010). Thus, while complaints have a largely negative impact on employees, and this constrains complaint-driven firm learning, there is some indication that customer suggestions may be positively received and utilized by firms.

To further theoretically characterize suggestion sharing we next explicitly contrast complaints and suggestions and note implications for customer suggestion management.

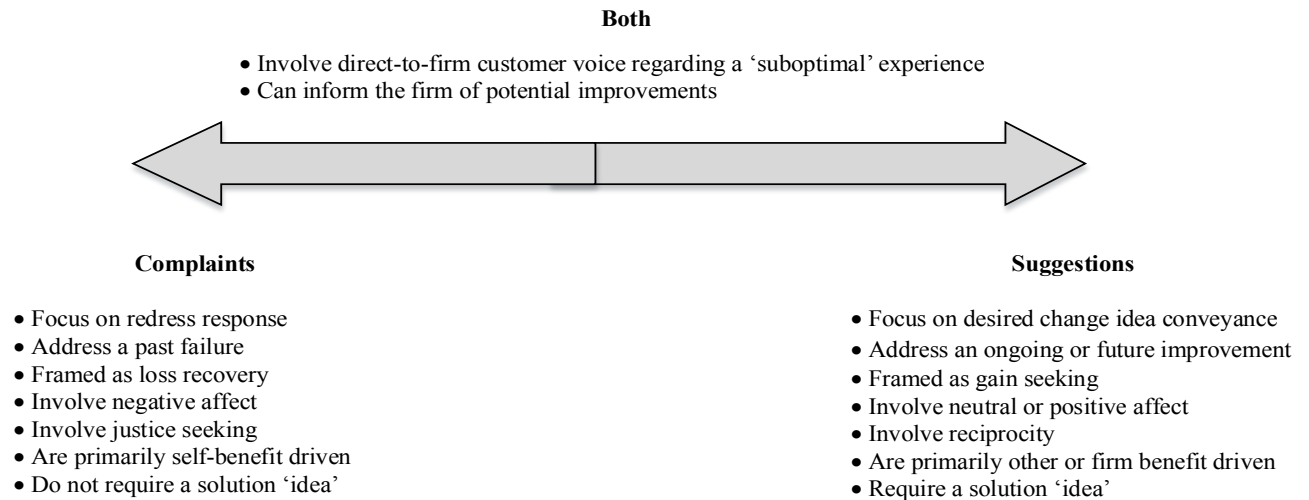
CONTRASTING COMPLAINTS AND SUGGESTIONS

At a superficial level, customer suggestions and customer complaints appear essentially the same. Both arise from customers experiencing 'suboptimal' or 'deficient' elements of an offering. Further, direct-to-firm suggestion sharing and what is often called redress-seeking 'private' voice (Singh, 1988) both involve the customer communicating with the firm ('voicing') to convey their desire to see something done about the deficiency, and they are both viewed as an important source of information about potential firm improvements.

However, while complaints and suggestions might thus be conceptualized as common behaviors lying along a continuum, their 'pure' forms reveal quite distinct traits, and these differences have important implications for managing each. The distinctions between the two can be summarized in terms of the goal of the customer effort, the customers' loss versus gain framing, the affect involved, key customer motivations and the information content (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Complaints versus Suggestions

Complaints versus Suggestions



Goal of the Effort. The goal of complaining is to receive redress for an experienced failure (Ma, Baohong, & Kekre, 2015; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). The goal of suggestion sharing is to convey an idea regarding something that might be improved. Implications for this difference include the likely effect of believing that a firm already knows about the ‘issue’. Evidence regarding the negative impact of multiple firm failures (Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002) and references to other customer postings when establishing protest web sites (Ward & Ostrom, 2006) suggests that believing that a firm already knows about a failure issue and has done nothing to remedy it makes customers angry, and hence more inclined to complain. On the other hand, believing that a firm already knows about a potential improvement, but has taken no action, should make one less motivated to share related ideas (Burnham, 2019).

Loss Versus Gain Framing. Prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) asserts that people commonly frame situations from either a loss

perspective or a gain perspective. Complaints address experienced failures; not only was an outcome not as good as it could have been, but it did not meet minimum expectations. Thus complaints are loss-recovery oriented and largely past-focused. Suggestions, on the other hand, address potential improvements to ongoing operations or future offerings. Thus suggestions are gain-oriented and future-focused. Due to this difference in framing, the hurdle to successful handling of complaints and suggestions is likely to differ.

There is some evidence that simply providing customers with an opportunity to voice may be a cost-effective method for managing complaints and suggestions. Voicing customers often just want to be heard and feel ‘understood’ (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012; Merlo, Eisingerich, & Auh, 2014). Even in the absence of redress results, allowing customers to complain has been shown to have a positive long term effect on satisfaction (Nyer, 1999), a result attributed to the benefits of venting negative emotions (Alicke et al., 1992; Kolodinsky &

Aleong, 1990) and the effects of feeling ‘heard’ on one’s sense of procedural and interactional justice (Blodgett & Tax, 1993; Mittal, Huppertz, & Khare, 2008). Similarly, customer idea sharing has been associated with motivations that include a desire to express oneself and share one’s insights (Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007); thus, consumers sharing their suggestion ideas may be content with just feeling heard.

That said, even if the nominal ‘reward’ for feeling heard is equivalent for both, since the complainer begins further down on the flatter part of the prospect theory loss curve, while the suggestor begins near the origin where the upward-sloping curve is steep, one would predict that voicing, in and of itself, would have less beneficial impact on the complainer than the suggestor. More generally, complaining customers are likely to perceive that distributive justice has not been achieved if their loss is not addressed, regardless of the psychological benefits of venting (Blodgett, Granbois, & Walters, 1993; Blodgett & Tax, 1993; Davidow, 2003). On the other hand, much as advice giving has been shown to increase the advice givers’ sense of power even when the advice is not taken (Schaefer, Tost, Huang, Gino, & Larrick, 2018), those sharing their suggestion ideas may be reasonably satisfied even without evidence of idea implementation by the company. They will tend to recognize that it is up to the company to assess whether an idea warrants action, so just feeling that they have been heard can largely fulfill their goals (Fombelle et al., 2016).

Affect and Voice. Complaining customers typically experience negative affect towards the firm. Customers complain when they are dissatisfied with something sufficiently important that it threatens their goals or ego (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998), resulting in stress and negative affect. Correspondingly, customers with strong positive sentiments towards a firm are less likely to complain even when they do experience a failure (Mittal et al., 2008). Such customers perceive less need for justice and are more concerned about threatening existing relationship ties (Umashankar et al., 2017).

Suggestion sharing customers, on the other hand, typically experience neutral or positive affect towards the firm (Burnham, 2018).

When overall expectations are exceeded, customers experience positive affective responses—e.g. satisfaction. Satisfied customers are more inclined to invest their time and effort in contributing “constructive and insightful suggestions” (Eisingerich et al., 2014, p. 43). This effect is explained by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which argues that satisfied customers are more interested in the welfare of the organization (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995) and should be more motivated “to reciprocate favorable treatment with suggestions and helpful comments that benefit the firm” (Bettencourt, 1997, p. 391). Thus, in line with the characterization of customer engagement behaviors as being ‘positively-valenced’ (Brodie et al., 2011), we expect that greater satisfaction with the firm, and stronger firm relationships, will increase suggestion sharing behavior.

Customer Motivations. While acknowledging that a subset of customers complain with a desire to influence firm behavior towards other customers (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2012), complaint behavior is largely self-benefit (redress) motivated (Chebat, Davidow, & Cudjovi, 2005; Ma et al., 2015). As such, complaint management largely focuses on customer recovery, or redress—that is, on methods to provide a restored sense of justice to the customer. Complaining customers are commonly compensated to provide them with a sense of distributive justice (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011a). Further, a belief that complaining will result in compensation should increase the likelihood of complaint voicing (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998).

Customer suggestions, on the other hand, while potentially also self-benefit motivated, are largely motivated by a desire to help other customers and/or to reciprocate for positive service received by helping the firm (Burnham, 2019). Offering compensation for advice can undermine consumers’ communal relationship motivations for sharing advice-like information (Liu & Gal, 2011). Customers motivated to help others and the firm are instead more likely to share their information when the firm conveys that it uses customer input to improve their processes and offerings (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2012).

Information Content. A customer making a complaint must merely express what has gone wrong, that is, what has not met their expectations. While they may also convey what redress they want – that is, what they desire to achieve distributive justice – ideas regarding an ongoing solution are not typically part of complaints. A customer making a suggestion, on the other hand, must convey what the firm could do, going forward, to make things better. While we acknowledge that complaints can convey improvement ideas, and that suggestions can be as vague as stating a desired end goal (e.g. “make the product easier to use”), the distinction between the ends of the spectrum are rather stark – a complaint conveys “I’ve had a problem” while a suggestion conveys “This is *how* you could make things better in the future.”

Further, while a complaining customer’s personal instance of the problem may be novel, the nature of the problem underlying most complaints received by firms is often already known, and complaints tend to only provide ambiguous information regarding underlying problems (Jacoby & Jaccard, 1981). Thus, except in the relatively rare case where the firm has not yet heard of the problem before, there is relatively little novel improvement information in most complaints. Suggestions, on the other hand, involve creative thinking and the application of knowledge learned in other contexts towards resolving the ‘issue’ (Füller et al., 2007). In addition, suggestions can address a much broader range of potential improvement topics than just those that aggravate customers sufficiently to invoke a complaint.

Perhaps more importantly, advice sharing invokes empathic thinking by the customer – that is, consideration of the firms’ perspective (Liu & Gal, 2011). Thus, those sharing suggestions are likely to not only have thought more creatively, and more broadly, about potential improvements (vis-a-vis those making complaints), they are more likely to have vetted their ideas and to only convey those that are deemed helpful to the firm (Burnham, 2019). As a result, customer suggestions should contain more unknown-to-the-firm, potentially useful improvement information than customer complaints.

SUGGESTION SHARING PREVALENCE, FORM AND PROPORTION

Next we turn to empirically characterizing consumer suggestion-sharing behavior. Little is known about such behavior, including whether it is a relatively rare or a relatively common phenomenon. By exploring the prevalence of consumer suggestion sharing we seek to provide a baseline for characterizing it and for understanding how big of an opportunity (and challenge) it represents for companies. Thus, in line with significant research on the prevalence of consumer complaint behavior (Best & Andreasen, 1976; Ford et al., 2004; Garrett, 2004), we begin empirically characterizing suggestion sharing by studying its prevalence. Since the mechanisms that consumers use to convey suggestions—including whether they are made face-to-face or electronically—have an important impact on their management, we also characterize those.

In addition, we seek to characterize suggestion sharing as a proportion of, or relative prevalence to, the number of suggestion ideas that consumers conceive of. Research has established that many potential complaints are not voiced (Voorhees, Brady, & Horowitz, 2006). Only between one third to two thirds of dissatisfied customers complain to the firm, a propensity that varies by industry (see Ford et al., 2004, for a review of related studies). Knowing this baseline, firms can estimate the prevalence of unreported problems from the number reported.

While complaint behavior is indicative of, and limited by, the number of problems or failures that customers experience, suggestion sharing is indicative of, and intrinsically limited by, the number of suggestion ideas that consumers conceive of. If consumers share the majority of the suggestion ideas they have, they would be considered highly engaged (Brodie et al., 2011; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010). Alternatively, if consumers share only a small portion (or none) of the improvement ideas they have, they would be considered unengaged—and they would represent an important potential, but untapped, source of ideas and relationship enhancement. Thus one important question regarding suggestion sharing is its incidence relative to the

number of consumer conceived of suggestion ideas.

METHOD

We draw upon seven survey-based studies employing different combinations of three techniques for measuring suggestion-sharing behavior. Table 1 summarizes key elements of each study; see the Appendix for details regarding the procedures employed. Since the order of the studies is not relevant to our findings or discussion we have chosen to label them with letters (e.g. A, B, C...). The multiple techniques employed each have strengths and weaknesses for studying suggestion sharing. Further, by using multiple techniques we support the ability to cross-validate results and to compare the insights that each produces.

The Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) elicits respondent memories of a specific experience. While commonly associated with qualitative content analysis of consumer incident reports (cf. Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990), CIT can also be employed to elicit memories of incidents so that scaled response questions can be asked about them (a technique also known as retrospective experience sampling; see Harrison-Walker, 2019). With an explicit incident in the respondents' mind, we employ scaled questions

to quantitatively characterize the incident. Further, we use respondents' ability to recall a suggestion sharing incident as a measure of suggestion sharing prevalence.

Direct Reporting Technique

Marketing research commonly relies on direct reporting from respondents (Fisher, 1993). Direct reporting can ask respondents to recall and report on their aggregate behavior over time. For our purposes, such reporting is required to expand from measuring the proportion of consumers who report sharing at least a single suggestion to describing the frequency with which consumers share suggestions. To further characterize suggestion sharing we employ Likert-type responses to suggestion-sharing prevalence statements.

Scenario Response Technique

Scenarios are widely employed in marketing research to provide controlled contexts in which to elicit responses. Because scenarios are presented in the survey, respondents do not have to recall (or recreate) memories of prior events. By holding a suggestion-sharing context constant and evaluating the distribution of suggestion-sharing likelihood responses we gain perspective on how factors outside of the context impact suggestion sharing.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF STUDIES

Technique and Characteristic	Study A	Study B	Study C	Study D	Study E	Study F	Study G
CIT Incident Recall	✓	✓	✓				✓
CIT Characterization	✓	✓	✓				✓
Direct Numerical Recall		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Direct Scaled Prevalence		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Scenario Likelihood	✓				✓	✓	
Sample Size (N)	244	77	93	117	464	206	200
Sample Source	Students	MTurk	Prolific	Students	MTurk	Students	MTurk

RESULTS

CIT-Based Results

A CIT-based approach was used to measure the proportion of respondents who could recall an incident in which they shared a suggestion with a company where they did not work. Respondents in studies A, B, C and G were asked whether they could recall engaging in a suggestion sharing incident in the prior year. The instructions clarified that sharing a suggestion involved providing an idea for making an ongoing improvement that might benefit more than themselves. The results indicate that approximately two thirds of respondents had shared a suggestion with a company. More than 70% of those suggestions were unsolicited, that is, made without the company asking for them. See Table 2 for more details.

In three studies, respondents who had shared a suggestion characterized the method used. The top reported suggestion-sharing methods were face to face (39.8% of suggestions on average),

via email (20.0%) and via the company's website (15.3%). See Table 3 for more details.

In one study (Study G) respondents characterized their suggestion as addressing a change to a product or to a service. Only 20.8% of respondents indicated that their suggestion involved a product change, while 65.8% of respondents indicated their suggestion was a service change. Most of the remaining 13.4% who chose 'other' described service-related factors such as the company website, store layout or décor, or advertising.

Direct Reporting-Based Results

In six studies (Studies B through G) we asked respondents to directly report how many times they had shared suggestions with companies in the prior year. On average respondents reported sharing 2.26 suggestions in the prior year, while 30% of respondents reported sharing no suggestions. See Table 4 for more details.

TABLE 2: PROPORTION OF RESPONDENTS RECALLING A CRITICAL SUGGESTION INCIDENT IN THE PRIOR YEAR

Proportion of Respondents	Study A	Study B	Study C	Study D	Weighted Mean
Recalled a Suggestion Incident	54.5%	84.0%	66.7%	75.3%	66.8%
Suggestion was Unsolicited	66.9%	74.6%	72.6%	75.8%	72.2%
N	244	77	93	198	612

TABLE 3: SUGGESTION SHARING METHOD PREVALENCE

Suggestion-Sharing Method	Study B	Study C	Study D	Weighted Mean
Face to Face	38.1%	33.9%	43.0%	39.8%
Email	20.6%	25.8%	17.4%	20.0%
Website	15.9%	19.4%	13.4%	15.3%
Phone	9.5%	6.5%	10.1%	9.1%
Paper	11.1%	0.0%	4.7%	5.1%
Social Media	3.2%	6.5%	5.4%	5.1%
Chat	0.0%	3.2%	2.7%	2.2%
Other	1.6%	4.8%	2.7%	2.9%
N	63	62	149	274

We also directly asked respondents how many times they had conceived of suggestion ideas for companies (where they did not work) in the prior year, independently of whether or not they had shared those ideas. On average, respondents reported conceiving of 5.02 suggestion ideas in the prior year; only 7.8% reported that they had conceived of no (zero) suggestion ideas. Across the studies, respondents reported conceiving of approximately twice as many suggestion ideas as they shared with companies. See Table 5 for more details.

Another approach taken to assess the relative prevalence of idea generation compared to suggestion sharing was the use of scaled Likert-

type items. Responses to two items were used to assess idea generation prevalence: “I *regularly think of ways* that things could be done better at companies” and “I *come up with a lot of ideas* for how companies could do something better.” Two other items were used to assess suggestion sharing prevalence: “I *regularly give companies suggestions*” and “I *give companies a lot of ideas* for how to do something better.” Participants responded to each item on a seven-point scale anchored by strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (7). In all studies the item pairs exhibited strong reliability (Cronbach alpha’s > .80). The items were thus averaged to create composite scales of idea generation and suggestion sharing.

TABLE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES AND MEANS FOR NUMBER OF SUGGESTIONS SHARED IN THE PRIOR YEAR

Number of Suggestions Shared	Study B	Study C	Study D	Study E	Study F	Study G	Weighted Mean
0 (zero)	20.0%	33.3%	33.3%	28.2%	38.3%	25.5%	30.0%
1	40.0%	29.0%	17.9%	18.1%	23.3%	25.0%	22.6%
2	25.3%	16.1%	13.7%	19.5%	12.6%	26.0%	19.0%
3	10.7%	14.0%	13.7%	10.4%	12.6%	12.5%	11.8%
4	0.0%	2.2%	9.4%	9.5%	6.8%	2.5%	6.6%
5	1.3%	1.1%	0.9%	4.3%	2.4%	5.5%	3.4%
6 or more	2.7%	4.3%	11.1%	9.1%	3.9%	3.0%	6.5%
Mean	1.45	1.34	2.90	2.84	1.65	1.89	2.26
N	77	93	117	464	206	200	1,157

TABLE 5: DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES AND MEANS FOR NUMBER OF SUGGESTION IDEAS CONCEIVED OF IN THE PRIOR YEAR

Number of Suggestion Ideas	Study B	Study C	Study D	Study E	Study F	Study G	Weighted Mean
0 (zero)	9.3%	18.3%	9.4%	7.6%	4.4%	5.5%	7.8%
1	20.0%	16.1%	12.0%	10.6%	8.7%	6.0%	10.7%
2	18.7%	11.8%	12.0%	15.6%	18.0%	22.0%	16.7%
3	22.7%	8.6%	15.4%	22.1%	23.8%	21.0%	20.5%
4	13.3%	7.5%	10.3%	18.4%	21.4%	13.5%	16.0%
5	4.0%	2.2%	11.1%	7.1%	6.8%	10.5%	7.4%
6 or more	12.0%	35.5%	29.9%	18.6%	17.0%	21.5%	20.9%
Mean	3.19	4.45	7.98	5.33	4.02	4.57	5.02
N	77	93	117	464	206	200	1,157

The label closest to the cross-sample mean for the idea generation scale (4.92) indicates that respondents, on average, ‘somewhat agree’ that they generate a lot of ideas for how companies could things better. By contrast, the label closest to the mean for the suggestion-sharing scale (3.07) indicates that respondents ‘somewhat disagree’ that they share a lot of suggestions with companies. Paired sample t-tests comparing responses to the two scales support the conclusion that idea generation is significantly more prevalent than suggestion sharing. See Table 6 for more details.

Scenario-Based Results

Four different scenarios were employed across the studies, two in Study B and one in Studies E and F. For this research, the scenarios were not employed as experiments to manipulate and contrast responses across conditions, but rather to assess the variability of responses to realistic suggestion situations. In each, respondents were presented with a situation in which they had come up with a suggestion idea (see the Appendix). They were then asked to rate their likelihood of communicating ‘their’ suggestion idea to the company on a seven-point scale anchored by extremely unlikely (1) and extremely likely (7).

TABLE 6: SCALED PREVALENCE OF IDEA GENERATION AND SUGGESTION SHARING ACROSS STUDIES

Scale	Study B	Study C	Study D	Study E	Study F	Study G	Weighted Mean
Ideas - Mean	4.84	4.83	4.99	4.92	4.74	5.14	4.92
(SD)	(1.64)	(1.74)	(1.26)	(1.30)	(1.30)	(1.24)	
Suggestions	2.83	2.75	3.00	3.30	2.73	3.14	3.07
	(1.57)	(1.51)	(1.50)	(1.58)	(1.39)	(1.55)	
Difference	t (74) = 10.30***	t (92) = 11.50***	t (116) = 14.82***	t (461) = 23.95***	t (205) = 19.07***	t (199) = 18.86***	

*** = $p < .001$

TABLE 7. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES AND MEANS FOR SUGGESTION SHARING LIKELIHOOD BY STUDY AND SCENARIO

Suggestion Sharing Likelihood	Study A RedBox	Study A Blinds	Study E Bank ^a	Study F Grocery ^a
1	8.7%	14.8%	0%	4.2%
2	8.3%	14.0%	5.4%	12.5%
3	11.6%	13.6%	1.8%	20.8%
4	5.0%	7.4%	5.4%	8.3%
5	24.4%	21.4%	14.3%	16.7%
6	31.0%	15.6%	26.8%	33.3%
7	11.2%	13.2%	46.4%	4.2%
Mean	4.66	4.06	5.95	4.37
N	242	243	56	24

^a Results presented only for a single scenario configuration.

The results from the four scenarios (see Table 7) provide a few insights. First, the response

distributions vary significantly across the scenarios, showing, unsurprisingly, that the nature of the context—including the suggestion idea, its benefits, and the type of industry involved—affect consumers' likelihood of suggestion sharing. Second, the presence of significant response variance within each scenario highlights the effect of individual-level factors on suggestion sharing. Third, most of the response distributions evince a decided aversion to selecting the middle response of 'neither likely nor unlikely'—that is, when presented with a specific suggestion sharing opportunity respondents seem to quickly develop either an inclination to share the suggestion idea or an inclination not to, with most developing an inclination to do so.

DISCUSSION

Despite the popularity of the concept of customer suggestion sharing in the marketing literature, researchers to date have failed to characterize direct-to-firm consumer suggestion sharing theoretically or empirically. Related research indicates that suggestions can contribute valuable information to firms and that suggestion sharing can lead to stronger customer-firm relationships and positive sales outcomes. The current research contributes towards building a foundation for future research by theoretically distinguishing complaints from suggestions and by empirically characterizing consumer suggestion-sharing behavior.

Our theoretical contrast between complaints and suggestions highlights distinctions between the two in terms of the goal of the customer effort, the customers' loss versus gain framing, the affect involved, key customer motivations and the information content. Each of these differences has important implications for distinctly managing, and deriving value from, consumer suggestions.

Our empirical results establish a baseline on the prevalence of consumer suggestion sharing by indicating that a large majority of consumers share suggestion ideas with companies and by highlighting the prevalence of face-to-face, unsolicited suggestions shared in services contexts. Interestingly, despite the excitement regarding social media as a customer-firm communication and engagement channel (cf.

Hollebeek et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2015; Rosenmayer, McQuilken, Robertson, & Ogden, 2018), very few consumers appear to share their suggestion ideas that way. Approximately a quarter do not share suggestions at all despite conceiving of ideas for improvements that could be shared. Yet, on average, consumers conceive of around two times as many suggestion ideas as they share, highlighting the potential for companies to garner substantially more improvement ideas and feedback, and to develop stronger customer relationships, by encouraging greater suggestion sharing.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Our results indicate that a large portion of suggestion ideas go unshared. How can firms better avail themselves of these ideas—and the associated opportunity to better engage customers in a reciprocal relationship? Direct-to-firm suggestion sharing, by definition, takes place at the customer-firm interface (Eisingerich et al., 2014). If, as our data indicate, most suggestion sharing is unsolicited and made during face-to-face service encounters, then most suggestions are received by frontline employees at times the company can't control and in a format (verbally) that makes it difficult to capture shared ideas. Nonetheless, the value of 'small' data (rich, individualized, frontline-derived customer information) for organizational learning (Lam, Sleep, Hennig-Thurau, Sridhar, & Saboo, 2017) demands that firms attend to these challenges. Firms must better manage the interface where suggestion sharing occurs to reduce sharing hurdles, better fulfill customer suggestion-sharing goals, and garner as much customer knowledge as possible.

Most current complaint management systems and processes appear designed to placate customers and close cases, not to engage customers in idea sharing, enhance their sense of relational exchange and capture ideas for the company (Homburg, Fürst, & Koschate, 2010). Our theoretical characterization suggests some potentially important differences for suggestion-sharing management. While similar people may be involved (e.g. frontline and service employees) and similar systems might be used (e.g. CRM systems), the company communications, both internally and with the

customer, and the tactics employed in motivating and managing the behavior, should differ.

First, to better motivate suggestion sharing, firms should communicate to customers that they may not be aware of potential improvements. Second, firms should train frontline employees to focus on making suggestion-sharing customers feel heard rather than compensating them or providing them with redress. Third, firms should invest in establishing satisfying relationships with customers, as such investments will support a virtuous cycle of reciprocal contributions by customers. Finally, firms should recognize the potential value of customer suggestion ideas and invest in efforts to capture and learn from them. One helpful technique might be to make clearer to frontline employees how to collect and report on suggestions. Increasing frontline employees sense of self-efficacy regarding handling suggestions should improve their satisfaction with, and their willingness to engage in, such customer participation (Yim et al., 2012).

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

In addition to offering both theoretical and empirical foundations for future consumer suggestion-sharing studies, this research provides insights into how research techniques can influence suggestion-sharing study results. By employing multiple techniques to measure suggestion sharing behavior we were able to assess the effect of potential limitations and biases inherent to each technique. It is known, for example, that direct recall measures can prompt over-reporting of socially desirable behaviors (Fisher, 1993). CIT-based measures may correct for this as they force respondents to think of specific incidents and be ready to describe them.

That said, CIT-based measurement may underestimate behavior as respondents who engaged in the focal behavior less recently may have forgotten too many details to confidently claim they can remember an incident. Further, survey-takers may know that if they claim to recall engaging in a behavior they will be asked to describe it. Some, in pursuit of rapid survey completion, may not make an effort to recall an incident or may simply decide not to claim one, thus reducing behavioral prevalence estimates. Our CIT-based measures indicate that

approximately 67% of respondents shared a suggestion in the prior year. Our estimate using direct reporting was 70%. Thus, while the CIT-based estimate was lower, the two approaches produced similar results indicating that both appear to be valid techniques for measuring suggestion sharing prevalence.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While the seven studies conducted employed a mixture of student and consumer panel respondents, we cannot claim that our samples, even when combined, reflect a representative sample of U.S. consumers, and thus that our inferences regarding the prevalence of suggestion sharing accurately reflect U.S. consumer behavior. That said, a post-hoc analysis of the relationships between respondent age, education and gender, and suggestion sharing and idea generation, revealed no consistent significant correlations across the samples. Further, the relative consistency of the results across the samples and research techniques adds to confidence that our estimates are roughly accurate.

This research provides a baseline for understanding the prevalence of suggestion-sharing behavior. Yet customer suggestions can be solicited or unsolicited, rewarded or unrewarded, public or private, written or verbal, express opinions, preferences, attitudes, or creative ideas, and be seen by firms as insight-generators, customer sentiment votes, or relationship building opportunities. In line with the many studies characterizing complaint behavior by industry and other factors (cf. Ford et al., 2004), much remains to be done to fully characterize when, where and why suggestion sharing occurs. For example, cross-cultural research on the prevalence of suggestion sharing is needed to extend research on cross-cultural complaint differences (cf. Blodgett et al., 2018; Voss, Roth, Rosenzweig, Blackmon, & Chase, 2004).

Similarly, research is needed to extend prior studies of firm complaint handling processes (cf. Hansen et al., 2009; Homburg et al., 2010) to evaluate, and characterize, how firms handle, and view, customer suggestions. The authors' sense, drawn from personal experience and customer service manager interviews, is that

relatively few firms have formal processes and systems in place to distinctly capture, much less encourage and leverage the benefits of, consumer suggestions. Regrettably, if correct, this failing would limit researchers' ability to study suggestion handling and its customer impact from the firm side, as has been done for complaint behavior (cf. Knox & van Oest, 2014).

A great deal of research over the past four decades has focused on understanding and managing customer complaint behavior. Such research does not adequately characterize, explain or guide the management of consumer suggestion sharing. Suggestion sharing is a common, distinct, and important form of

consumer voice behavior that warrants focused study. Such research must help firms learn to better avail themselves of consumers' desire to share their improvement ideas.

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APPENDIX: DESCRIPTION OF STUDIES

Study A

A survey was conducted employing undergraduate students of business school classes from a large public U.S. university. Participants were awarded extra class credit. 261 responses were received. After removing eight that had not completed the survey and nine that failed two or more attention checks a sample of 244 responses was used for subsequent analyses.

Respondents were given the following definition for suggestions: For the purposes of this survey, a suggestion is an idea that is given to a company to improve something in an ongoing manner. A critical incident technique was employed. Respondents were asked to try to think of a time that they had made a suggestion to a company (or a person at a company) where they did not work. Those that could recall such an instance were then asked to describe the suggestion and answer questions characterizing it. After the critical incident questions, respondents were presented with two suggestion scenarios (Redbox and Blinds.com -- see below) and asked to scale their likelihood of 'making the effort to convey this suggestion' to the company. They were then asked to provide written responses to the questions "Why would you?" and "Why wouldn't you?" The survey concluded with demographic measures.

Redbox Scenario

Imagine that you regularly rent video DVD's from Redbox. You pick up the DVD's and usually watch them that evening and return them the following day. You are charged a \$2 per night rental fee. Occasionally you forget and leave the DVD in the player and don't notice it for a few days or more. When you do notice it and return it, you are charged for each day the DVD was out.

You think of an idea to suggest to Redbox: They should send you an email reminding

you when you haven't returned a DVD within your 'normal' return timeframe. You already receive purchase and return confirmation emails from Redbox, so you know that this should be possible.

Blinds.com Scenario

Imagine that you have purchased some blinds from Blinds.com to install at home. When they arrive you unpack everything and read through the installation instructions. The instructions tell you to install three brackets to hold up the blinds – one marked Left, one marked Right, and one marked Middle. You install the three brackets, with the middle one half way between the right and left ones. When you try to insert the blinds into the brackets, the middle bracket interferes with the center line of strings that holds up the blinds. You realize that the middle bracket has to be reinstalled slightly off center for the blinds to work properly.

You have learned your lesson, and now know how to install such brackets correctly. However, you think that Blinds.com ought to revise their installation instructions. It would be easy for them to convey that the middle bracket must go slightly off center.

Study B

A survey of U.S. consumers was conducted using MTurk. The sample consisted of 77 responses, all of which were used in some analyses.

A critical-incident technique was employed; respondents were asked to try to recall a time that they had made a suggestion to a company (or person at a company) where they did not work. Respondents who could were next asked to describe their suggestion. They were then asked whether the suggestion was made after the company asked for feedback or without the company asking for it, and they selected the method used to communicate the suggestion.

Respondents were next asked to report the number of suggestions they had made and the

number of suggestion ideas they had thought of (whether given or not) in the prior year. A seven item scale with options for zero through ‘six or more’ was used to prompt more accurate recall. If respondents selected ‘six or more’ they were given a second question with a drop-down menu ranging from 6 to 50 from which to select their response. This ‘two stage’ questioning was designed to reduce overestimation of recalled events due to scale anchoring by first presenting a scale with evident variance in the low range of expected typical suggestion-sharing activity while still allowing those with behavior in the skewed right tail of the behavioral distribution to record their responses.

Finally, respondents were asked to respond to four seven-point Likert scaled items (with strongly agree and strongly disagree anchors) regarding their idea formation and suggestion-sharing behavior. These questions were designed to mimic each other in pairs, with one of each pair addressing idea generation and the other addressing suggestion sharing. The survey concluded with demographic measures.

Study C

A survey of US consumers was conducted using Prolific, an online survey panel tool similar to MTurk. The sample consisted of 100 completed results. Seven responses were removed from analysis due to missing more than one attention checks, resulting in 93 responses used for analysis. The survey procedure was equivalent to that used in Study B.

Study D

A survey was conducted employing undergraduate students of business school classes from a large public U.S. university. Participants were awarded extra class credit. One hundred twenty-eight responses were received. After removing one that had not

completed the survey and ten that failed two or more attention checks a sample of 117 responses was used for subsequent analyses. A direct reporting method equivalent to that used in Study B and Study C was employed. Respondents reported the number of suggestions they had shared and the number of suggestion ideas they had thought of (whether shared or not) in the prior year. They then responded to four Likert scaled items regarding their idea formation and suggestion-sharing behavior. The survey concluded with demographic measures.

Study E

A survey of US consumers was conducted using MTurk. The initial sample consisted of 502 completed surveys. Thirty responses were removed from analysis due to missing two or more attention checks, resulting in 464 responses that were used for analysis.

The survey employed a method equivalent to that used in Study D, except that it also included a scenario and measured reported suggestion sharing likelihood for it. The scenario was created to reflect a situation in which the suggestion would provide functional utility value for customers (a banking scenario). For the purposes of a separate study, scenario content was manipulated in terms of the evident self, other, and firm benefits that enacting the proposed suggestion would create. For this study, results are presented only for the condition in which obvious reasons *not to* share the suggestion were absent – that is, when adopting the suggestion would not involve negative outcomes for the self, other consumers, or the firm. Suggestion-sharing likelihood was measured as in the prior studies. (scenario available upon request)

Study F

A survey was conducted employing undergraduate students of business school classes from a large public U.S. university.

Participants were awarded extra class credit. 223 completed responses were received. After removing 17 that failed two or more attention checks a sample of 206 responses was used for subsequent analyses.

The survey employed a method equivalent to that used in Study E. A new scenario was employed, a retail grocery scenario in which the idea was to present assembled dinner ingredients up front. (scenario available upon request)

Study G

A survey of US consumers was conducted using MTurk. The sample consisted of 200 completed surveys, all of which were used in the analyses. The survey contained a CIT-based portion and a direct response portion. In the CIT-portion, respondents were asked to try to recall a time that they had made a suggestion to a company (or person at a company) where they did not work. Respondents who could recall making a suggestion were next asked whether the suggestion was made after the company asked for feedback or without the company asking for it, whether the change sought was primarily a product change or a service change, and to note the method used to communicate the suggestion. Respondents were next asked to recall a time that they had conceived of a suggestion idea but had *not* conveyed it to the company. Those that could were asked to describe their unshared suggestion idea.

In the direct response portion, respondents were asked to report the number of suggestions they had made and the number of suggestion ideas they had thought of (whether shared or not) in the prior year, as described in earlier studies. They were then asked to respond to four seven-point Likert scaled items with strongly agree and strongly disagree anchors regarding their idea generation and suggestion-sharing behavior.