

UNDERSTANDING SOLDIERS' RESPONSES TO PRODUCT DISSATISFACTION IN FIELD TRAINING ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

A substantial literature has accumulated on the ways in which consumers respond to dissatisfaction with products and services. However, no research has examined if these behaviors characterize soldiers' reactions to product dissatisfaction while participating in field training exercises. To address this question, a series of focus groups was conducted with soldiers as part of a program to develop a comprehensive typology of responses to dissatisfaction in field training environments. An analysis of the discussions indicated support for the use of responses similar to Hirschman's exit, voice and loyalty as well as responses resembling Rusbult's neglect and Huefner & Hunt's retaliation. Results are discussed in terms of the impact of the field environment on responses and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

A substantial literature has accumulated on the ways in which consumers respond to dissatisfaction with products and services (e.g., see volumes by Day, 1978 and Day & Hunt, 1992, 1993, 1994). Although some of this research is the result of purely academic pursuits, the practical relevance of this topic cannot be overlooked. In recent decades, business has shifted its focus from simply increasing sales and profits to one in which fulfilling customer needs and wants is key (Band, 1991; Hinton & Schaeffer, 1994; Whiteley, 1991). Understanding how consumers react to a faulty product or service is consistent with this new emphasis. Although complaints made to sellers are the most direct means buyers have to communicate dissatisfaction, studies have shown that relatively few dissatisfied consumers respond this way (TARP, 1986). Therefore, determining and understanding the whole spectrum of behavioral and non-behavioral ways in which consumers react can provide business with important information to gauge performance.

Influenced by the customer orientation in business and the resurgence of concern with military quality of life issues, U.S. Army product

developers have become interested in designing products that not only meet military design and performance specifications, but also satisfy their customers - soldiers. Part of this effort has been to understand the modes by which soldiers respond to dissatisfaction with military products while involved in field training exercises. The overall purpose of these exercises is to prepare soldiers for performing in real-life combat situations. (This environment will be described in greater detail later.) Compared to the average civilian consumer, soldiers in the field have little freedom of choice. Therefore, unlike dissatisfied civilians, soldiers who are dissatisfied with a ration or a piece of equipment often lack the opportunity to place formal complaints, to obtain replacements, or to terminate their participation in the situation. Examining responses to dissatisfaction in field environments can provide product military developers with an important source of information about the status of their products once they are fielded. This work can also be used to design a formal system for soldiers in the field to express problems with items. In addition, it may also contribute to our understanding of how people in non-military environments where response options are limited handle dissatisfaction.

This paper describes the initial stage of a research program being conducted at the U.S. Army Natick Research, Development and Engineering Center (NATICK) to develop a typology of responses to military product dissatisfaction in field environments. First, existing categorization schemes are reviewed. Then the results of a series of focus groups examining the modes soldiers have used to respond to product dissatisfaction are presented, followed by conclusions and directions for further research on this topic.

A Review of Existing Typologies of Responses to Consumer Dissatisfaction

Although the Army's interest in how soldiers respond to product dissatisfaction is relatively new, a review of the literature on civilian consumers' responses to dissatisfaction indicates that several

classification schemes already exist. Many early studies (e.g., Mason & Himes, 1973; Zaltman, Srivastava, & Deshpande, 1978) drew a distinction between complainants and noncomplainants. Although simple, these categories, in fact, were comprised of several dimensions. For example, "to complain" can involve three distinct activities: (a) switching a brand or store; (b) making a complaint to a seller; and (c) telling others about the dissatisfactory experience (Richins, 1983). This confusion caused inconsistencies in operational definitions across studies which could account for the lack of consensus in their results (Kraft, 1977; Warland, Hermann & Willits, 1975).

Day and Landon (1977) grouped consumer reactions into a two-tiered hierarchy. On the first tier, behavioral responses were distinguished from non-behavioral ones. The second tier was composed of public and private responses. Public responses are behaviors directed at individuals outside the dissatisfied consumer's social network, e.g., those directly involved with the problem (retailers, manufacturers, etc.) or "third parties" (Better Business Bureau, Federal Trade Commission, etc.). Examples include placing a formal complaint and seeking redress. In contrast, private actions are behaviors aimed at handling the problem in a private or personal manner. Communications directed at one's informal social network, i.e., friends, family, and other individuals outside the "professional" sector, exemplify this category.

Hirschman's (1970) work, outlined in his classic book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States*, is probably the most well-known typology of responses to dissatisfaction. Although originally proposed to explain reactions in organizations and political systems, it is easily applied to consumer situations. According to Hirschman, the two principal modes of expressing dissatisfaction available to consumers are exit and voice. Exit occurs when dissatisfied consumers "dissociate themselves from the object of their dissatisfaction." Examples include switching brands or discontinuing patronage. The probability of using exit increases to the extent that the consumer has little loyalty to the brand or the retailer and suitable alternatives are available. **V**oic**e** entails open and direct articulation of a problem,

ranging from "faint grumbling to violent protest." Examples include making a complaint to a retailer or a third party. Unlike exit where the goal is to escape the problem, the purpose of voice is to change the situation. As such, it is more costly than exit in terms of the time and effort members must expend to influence the organization. For this reason, Hirschman contends that in most circumstances dissatisfied consumers will favor exit over voice. Yet, there are situations in which voice is more probable. For example, voice will be used when the buyer is confident that it will induce change. Furthermore, to the extent that an individual can contribute to the "public happiness" by an open expression of dissatisfaction, voice will be the preferred response (Hirschman, 1974). Voice is also likely when the consumer has no or only poor alternatives.

In addition to voice and exit, a third possible response to dissatisfaction is loyalty. Like voice, loyalty implies that the dissatisfied consumer will continue to buy the brand or frequent the retailer. Unlike voice, the consumer declines any direct expression of dissatisfaction. He or she may expect the situation to improve, but through the efforts of someone else.

Several authors have refined Hirschman's typology by adding responses or by clarifying the meaning of the original categories. Rusbult and Zembrodt (1983) used inductive means to verify the use of exit, voice and loyalty in response to dissatisfaction in interpersonal relationships. In contrast to deductive methods by which theorists classify behavior on the basis of their own ideas of reality, the advantage of an inductive approach is that the classification of responses is based on how individuals actually enact them. The results of Rusbult and Zembrodt's inductive study supported the use of exit, voice and loyalty in the relationship domain. A fourth response which the researchers termed "neglect" was also found. Behaviors exemplifying this category did not directly address the problem eliciting the dissatisfaction and were destructive to the relationship. In a series of studies investigating responses to dissatisfaction with restaurant food, Malafi (1992) operationalized neglect as refusing to leave a tip for the server. Sizable numbers of consumers reported enacting this response, particularly when they had not been a long-time

customer of the restaurant.

The work of Hunt and his co-workers (Huefner & Hunt, 1992; 1994; Hunt, 1991; Hunt & Hunt, 1990; Hunt, Hunt & Hunt, 1988) has focused on clarifying the meaning of exit. Like Rusbult and Zembrodt (1983), these authors have taken an inductive approach. Through content analyses of interviews with consumers, Huefner and Hunt (1992; 1994) reported evidence for three exit-related behaviors - retaliation, grudgeholding and avoidance. Retaliation involves not only terminating patronage, but deliberate efforts to get even with a seller. This response is precipitated by extreme dissatisfaction and anger. Behavioral expressions range from physically damaging the store or deliberately going out of one's way to damage the store's reputation, to causing some minor inconvenience to the retailer. Grudgeholding and avoidance are examples of "extended exit." Grudgeholding involves refusing to purchase a product or frequent a seller for a long period of time. This response carries a strong emotional component. When interviewed, grudgeholders were still visibly upset about the problem years after the incident occurred. Avoidance is also exit that continues for a long time, but it lacks the intense emotion of grudgeholding.

Singh's (1988) work has increased understanding of the voice response. Using inductive means, Singh found evidence for a typology based on identifying the object (i.e., person, group, institution) toward which a complaint is directed. The object varies along two dimensions. It is either outside of the consumer's social network (external) or part of it (not external), and it is either directly involved with the problem or not. Voice consumer complaint behavior (CCB) is addressed to objects external to the dissatisfied consumer's social circle and directly involved in the dissatisfying experience (e.g., retailer, manufacturer). Third party CCB is also geared to objects that are external to the consumer, but these entities are not directly involved in the dissatisfying transaction (e.g., Better Business Bureau, legal agencies, newspapers, etc.). With private CCB, objects of the complaint are part of the consumer's social network, yet are not directly involved in the dissatisfying experience (e.g., friends, relatives,

etc.). The final category, "not external but involved", is an "empty cell" into which no specific CCB is found.

In summary, this review indicates that several schemes are available to classify consumer responses to dissatisfaction. Hirschman's (1970) typology of exit, voice and loyalty has influenced much of the research in this area. More recent work by Rusbult (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983), Hunt (e.g., Huefner & Hunt, 1994) and Singh (1988) has broadened understanding of these responses. To date, no studies have examined whether the responses enacted by dissatisfied civilian consumers are made by soldiers in the field. Given the uniqueness of the military environment, it is possible that differences do exist. This topic is addressed in the next section.

Focus Groups to Understanding Soldiers' Responses to Dissatisfaction in the Field

An examination of soldiers' modes of responding to dissatisfaction with military products in the field is an important area of study for the Army to pursue. A thorough understanding of how soldiers deal with dissatisfaction would allow product developers to tap into soldiers' concerns about items, so that improvements can be made and customer satisfaction enhanced. It can also help with the development of a system in the field for soldiers to express problems with Army products. Such a system is currently unavailable. Moreover, these contributions are consistent with the Army's focus on improving soldier quality of life in field environments precipitated by the end of the Cold War and subsequent downsizing of forces.

As an initial step toward understanding the ways in which soldiers react to product dissatisfaction, a series of focus groups was conducted. The purpose was to determine if the responses demonstrated by dissatisfied civilian consumers as outlined in the preceding review would apply to soldiers in field environments. There is likely to be some overlap since soldiers do have experience in the civilian consumer market. However, there are clear differences between circumstances in the field and the civilian consumer market that make this a question worthy of empirical investigation. As stated earlier, the

goal of field training exercises is to prepare soldiers for performing in combat scenarios. The duration of a single exercise can range from one day to several weeks. During this time, soldiers live and work outdoors, exist in less than comfortable conditions, and are isolated from the larger civilian culture. With regard to consumer behavior, soldiers involved in field assignments generally lack the freedom of choice afforded in everyday living. The U.S. Army is the sole provider of most items. Products are issued to soldiers for free or purchased at a cost less than their commercial counterparts. Moreover, many products such as BDUs (Battle Dress Uniforms) are so specific to the Army that they cannot be replaced by civilian goods. Because of these things as well as the isolated nature of the field, there are no opportunities for soldiers to "shop around." How this situation affects soldiers' responses to product dissatisfaction was the subject of these focus groups.

METHOD

Five focus groups were conducted during the period of 1991-1994 to understand the ways in which soldiers respond to product dissatisfaction in the field. Two of the groups were conducted specifically to address this topic. The primary purpose of the other three groups was to obtain soldiers' reactions to particular products or issues. Questions relevant to product dissatisfaction were inserted at the end of these discussions.

Seven to fifteen soldiers participated in each group. The soldiers were selected by their commanding officers to take part in the discussions. These officers were not present during the focus groups. All groups were composed of enlisted soldiers, some of which were non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Only two female soldiers took part in the groups. All participants reported being involved in at least five field exercises during their time in the Army. Several had served in Operation Desert Shield/Storm.

The moderator presented the soldiers in each group with the following scenario for discussion: "Please think of a time when you became dissatisfied with a military product such as a ration, your uniform, or a piece of equipment

while in the field. How did you feel and what, if anything, did you do about it?"

Discussions were tape-recorded and lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. At the conclusion of the discussion, soldiers were thanked for their participation and dismissed.

RESULTS

Responses from the five groups were combined and classified by a research assistant into categories based on their similarities to each other. The research assistant was unfamiliar with any of existing typologies such as Hirschman's (1970). When the classification was complete, the categories that emerged resembled the exit, voice, and loyalty scheme proposed by Hirschman (1970). An additional response that bore similarities to neglect (Rusbult and Zembrodt, 1983) and retaliation (Huefner & Hunt, 1992; 1994) was also evident.

The first category of responses was similar to voice. It was divided into formal and informal complaining. Formal complaints to someone in a soldier's chain of command were rare, particularly among those at lower rank. This was not surprising since there is typically no formal mechanism similar to what is available to civilians by which soldiers can report dissatisfaction. Some did report taking problems to their squad or platoon leaders. However, most soldiers believed that the probability of such a complaint having an impact was low. When asked why, many were convinced that their opinions and problems meant little to those in charge. These beliefs are likely to reduce the chances of using voice (Hirschman, 1970). Social influences also discouraged formal complaints. In every focus group, several soldiers indicated that making a complaint to someone in charge carried the possibility of being labeled a "whiner" or "trouble-maker." These negative connotations increased the social costs of complaining, a factor also found to inhibit complaints among civilians (Richins, 1979). In addition, it was clear that, for many, the idea of placing a formal complaint was inconsistent with their definition of a "good soldier" who can withstand anything. As one soldier remarked, "life in the field is not supposed to be fun. It's supposed to test you." Soldiers in this group were

probably unlikely to complain since, given their low expectations for product performance, they were unlikely to be very dissatisfied when they actually encountered a faulty product. Although not every episode of dissatisfaction triggers a complaint, it is a necessary condition for a complaint to occur (Singh, 1988).

Informal complaining was the most frequently reported response to product dissatisfaction in the field. Soldiers often discussed what they did not like about a product with their peers. These discussions sometimes took on an angry tone, but they could also be relatively light-hearted. For example, several soldiers indicated that they enjoyed making fun of the deficient product with other soldiers. Although they conceded that informal complaining rarely solved the problem, it allowed them to "vent" their dissatisfaction and made them feel better.

Another category of responses was similar to exit. Although the field situation itself does not offer the array of alternative brands or sellers available to civilians to choose from, many soldiers still found ways to discontinue use of faulty military products. Three types of behavior exemplifying exit were mentioned in the discussions. Soldiers frequently substituted commercial products for military products that they found unacceptable. For example, soldiers mentioned spending their own money on commercial gloves rather than use the ones provided by the Army. Or they brought as much of their favorite commercial non-perishable food with them on a field exercise that they could pack to avoid eating military rations. Soldiers also refrained from using an unacceptable product, particularly a ration, by trading it away for something they found more acceptable. To illustrate, many soldiers who spent months in Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Shield/Storm reported trading an entree (e.g., chicken a la king) in the Meal, Ready-To-Eat (MRE) ration they received to obtain a specific entree (e.g., ham slice) in another MRE they liked better. What was interesting in these cases is that none of the rations were viewed as especially appetizing, but soldiers were willing to trade for what they found "less bad." Huefner and Hunt (1994) have observed that even among civilians with their array of choices, brand and retailer

selection may be as much related to avoidance as it is to preference. In the final instance of exit, soldiers discontinued use of the item, but they did not replace it with another. For example, several soldiers who did not like their gloves or goggles simply did not use them, in spite of the fact that by doing this they may have jeopardized their safety or made their jobs more difficult.

What one soldier called a "grin and bear it" attitude resembled Hirschman's (1970) loyalty. Many dissatisfied soldiers decided there was nothing they could do about a product they were dissatisfied with, so they just accepted the situation and used it. This response was often accompanied by rationalizations such as "It's all part of what you put up with as a soldier" and "It's nobody's fault. It's been like this for years. There's nothing anyone can do." In contrast to the group of soldiers who thought that poor rations or uniforms were part of "toughing it out" in the field, this group of soldiers appeared to expect better performance and to be genuinely dissatisfied with military products. Moreover, while the earlier group seemed almost motivated by poor product performance, the present group could be characterized as hopeless.

The final response combined elements of neglect and retaliation. The response was best described by what one soldier called "do what you can to get by." Soldiers reporting this response seemed to have a great deal of experience with poor products. Discussing the experience made them visibly angry because to them these products symbolized the Army's disregard for them. These soldiers also reported a desire to get even with the Army. Most did this by purposely lowering the effort they gave to their assignments. In other words, they did not work as hard as they could. Like neglect, this response was passive with regard to solving the problem causing the dissatisfaction. Enacting it was also damaging to the relationship between the soldier and the Army. In addition, like retaliation, it also carried a negative, sometimes intense, emotional component and was frequently accompanied by a desire to get even.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The categories of responses to product dissatisfaction in the field reported by soldiers in

these focus groups were similar to those displayed by civilian consumers. Responses connoting exit, voice and loyalty as well as a combination of neglect and retaliation were mentioned by the soldiers. Naturally, the behavioral manifestations of response categories like exit were somewhat different for them than for civilians due to differences in the two groups' environments.

Several interesting findings regarding the use of the responses were also evident. For instance, despite the lack of alternatives, few soldiers reported engaging in formal voice. This is in contrast to what Hirschman (1970) and others (e.g., Andreasen, 1985; Rusbult, Zembrodt & Gunn, 1982; Malafi, 1992; Singh, 1990) would have predicted. Although these focus groups demonstrated that soldiers sometimes "create" alternatives to poor military products, the number and quality of alternatives may be less important in determining complaints than factors like the perceived probability of the complaint having an impact. Certainly most of the soldiers in these focus groups stressed the futility of complaints made to platoon or squad leaders. In addition, the low number of formal complaints could also be highly influenced by the lack of a system to deal with such communication. It would be interesting to investigate the effect of placing such a mechanism in the field on the number of formal complaints made.

Informal voice was the most frequent response used by soldiers. Although this behavior could function like negative word-of-mouth, soldiers were more likely to report using this communication as an opportunity to "vent". This function of informal communication among dissatisfied consumers has rarely been examined (Malafi, 1991), but deserves empirical attention.

Data from these focus groups also highlight the complexity of the exit response previously suggested by Hunt and his colleagues (e.g., Huefner & Hunt, 1992, 1994; Hunt et al., 1988). In field environments which inherently offer few opportunities for comparing or switching products, soldiers enacted exit-related behaviors such as substituting commercial products for military ones and abandoning the poor product without any replacement. Delineating these types of exit behaviors can contribute to the development of alternative metrics to the standard hedonic rating

of product acceptance typically used in field evaluations.

Responses similar to neglect and retaliation were also apparent among the soldiers in these focus groups. With some exceptions (Huefner & Hunt, 1992, 1994; Malafi, 1992), these types of reactions have not received much examination in civilian consumers. Certainly for the soldiers in this study, the impact of using these responses was substantial in that their use influenced soldiers' overall performance in the field. These responses also highlight the effect of long-term dissatisfaction. Most soldiers who enacted retaliation and neglect reported frequently experiencing problems with products.

These focus groups also uncovered some of the non-behavioral or cognitive responses that accompany certain behavioral response categories. For example, many soldiers did not complain because it was incongruent with their image of a soldier, while many exhibited loyalty because they believed there was nothing they could do about the problem. Understanding these types of cognitions is important to delineating the causes of behavioral responses to dissatisfaction.

In conclusion, these focus groups are important first steps to understanding the ways in which soldiers respond to product dissatisfaction in the field. More controlled, quantitative research is needed to extend and verify the use of these responses in larger groups of soldiers. Data are currently being collected in several field evaluations for this purpose. The goal is to develop a comprehensive typology of soldiers' responses that will help product developers meet their goal of enhancing soldier satisfaction with military products.

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