

TRIGGER EVENTS: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CRITICAL EVENTS AND CONSUMERS' EVALUATIONS, STANDARDS, EMOTIONS, VALUES AND BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, satisfaction research has explored the processes consumers use to arrive at various satisfaction outcomes and have begun to expand to the entire postconsumption evaluation process. However, no research has focused specifically on the critical events, or triggers, that cause the evaluation process to occur and change. In order to thoroughly understand the dynamics behind why "satisfied" customers leave some relationships and remain loyal to others, we must look for the events that have significant impact on consumers' consumption experiences, the curves and obstacles in the road that cause them to alter course. This paper explores the satisfaction and related literatures for clues on what these events might involve. Empirical results from depth interviews with health club customers suggest that changes in product use, changes in evaluations, and use of comparison standards are associated with trigger events experienced by consumers. In contrast, emotion and changes in values were not often found to be associated with trigger events for this group. These findings are discussed as well as potential directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in Evaluations

It is generally accepted that consumers form satisfaction evaluations as a response to a particular product or service use situation. Over the years, extensive effort has been put into studying the evaluation process that leads to various satisfaction outcomes. However, one area that has often been implied or explicitly stated as a crucial one (Day, 1976; Woodruff, 1993) is that of critical incidents or triggers that initiate or impact the satisfaction process. As Day said nearly twenty years ago, "In general, something

out of the ordinary must occur either prior to the purchase process, during the purchase process, or during the consumption phase to *alert* the consumer or call his attention to some aspect of the purchase situation." (italics added: Day, 1976) This leads us to the conceptualization that something must stimulate the evaluation process itself. Day continued to state that a "...very important factor in the study of consumer satisfaction is the identification of the triggering cues which initiate an awareness or sensitivity to the purchase/consumption process and lead to conscious feelings about being satisfied or dissatisfied." Recently, Woodruff (1993) has also specifically called for research on critical incidents or trigger events that impact satisfaction and more broadly, the entire postpurchase evaluation process. Additionally, Woodruff and Gardial (1995) discussed events that trigger a change in customer values.

Even without the explicit call for an investigation of trigger events, most researchers in the satisfaction area often have alluded to critical events that impact the evaluation process. Yet, to date, not one study was found specifically exploring the types or characteristics of trigger events. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap and glean from the extant satisfaction and related literatures, information that might begin a stream of research in this area. At the very least, the literature raises important questions related to these stimulus events.

Trigger Event Defined

Although no explicit definition of a trigger event was found in the literature, a few researchers give us a place to start. As previously cited, Day (1976) stated that there were "triggering cues" that raise the consumer's awareness of the process or event. He also stated that something out of the ordinary must occur to cause an individual to be alerted to the event. Woodruff (1993) discussed

the dynamic nature of consumer satisfaction and indicated that certain events may cause a "devaluing" of the current product or service. He called for investigation into the "nature and determinants of change in postpurchase evaluations." Inherent in both approaches to the topic is that an event 1) is something specific that can be identified, 2) which causes a change in the customer's response to a product/service, and 3) is seen from the point of view of the individual being alerted. The definition we propose here is as follows:

A trigger event is a stimulus in the environment that is perceived by the consumer to be out of the ordinary and relevant to his/her product/service use, and which results in some form of change in cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral evaluative response relative to the particular product/service/seller in question.

We used this definition to look for instances of triggers showing up in existing literature on satisfaction. In the next section, we discuss what we learned.

TRIGGERS IN THE SATISFACTION LITERATURE

There are two broad questions important to address at this stage. The first is, what kinds of triggers are there? The second is, what do triggers do? The first focuses on characteristics of the events themselves. The second focuses on consumers' responses to the triggers.

Characteristics of Triggers

Addressing the first question, two basic characteristics of triggers appear to determine the extent of their influence on product/service attitudes and behaviors: the attributed source of the trigger event and abruptness or suddenness of the event. Attribution theory suggests that consumers respond differently depending on the perceived source of an event (Folkes, 1984; Stein, Trabasso, and Liwag, 1993; Swan and Trawick, 1994; Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988.) Folkes (1984) found that attribution theory helps to explain consumer's

responses to product failures. Specifically, she found that causal dimensions are related to expectations of future interactions. In a later study (Folkes, Koletsky, and Graham, 1987), she found that attributions had direct effects on desires to complain and continuance to use the same product, and indirect effects on evaluations of the supplier company. Richins (1983) found that if customers partially blamed themselves, they were less likely to tell others. Westbrook (1987) stated that those affects whose cause is attributed to the product or seller may be expected to have "systematic" influence on postpurchase behavior.

The second important characteristic of trigger events deals with their abruptness. Abruptness as seen from the perspective of the buyer, might be viewed as how surprising, sudden, or unexpected the event was. Unexpected events and negative events are two of the categories Weber used to classify reasons people ask 'why' something happened (Weber, 1992). Weiner (1980) classified causes by their underlying dimensions: stability of the event, locus, and controllability. The most common reason people seem to evaluate why an event has occurred is when the event is unexpected.

Both the notion of attributed source and abruptness are used here to group these events. However, no research has specifically addressed trigger events directly, making this study exploratory in nature. There may be many other ways of classifying trigger events, that will hopefully evolve as research continues. In this context, two appropriate questions are:

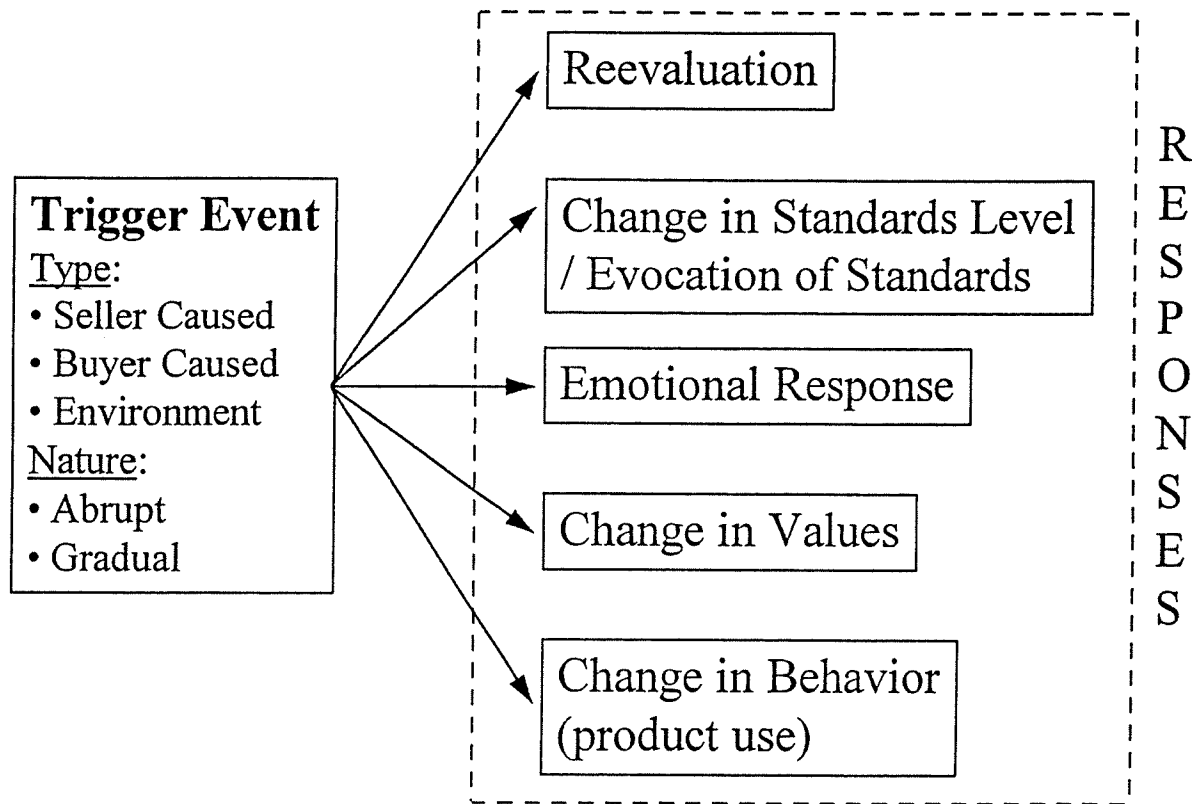
Q1a: What types of trigger events occur during product use?

Q1b: Is abruptness or suddenness characteristic of trigger events?

Role of Triggers as Motivators

Figure 1 depicts trigger events as those stimuli leading to five specific responses: a reevaluation, a change in standards level or those that are evoked, an emotional response, a change in values, and a behavioral change. Although trigger events may lead to many other responses, these five are of interest due to their importance in both

Figure 1
Trigger Response Model



satisfaction determination and the overall postpurchase evaluation process. It can be argued that there is potential interdependency among these responses (e.g., evaluation leading to emotion). For now, there will be no attempt to explore interactions among the responses.

Motivator of Evaluation. Certain events will trigger the consumer to be more attuned to the purchase/use process than normal (Day, 1976). In order to understand what they might be, we will start by exploring what we know about the postpurchase evaluation process itself. Inherent in the evolution of satisfaction research was the assumption that a product/service evaluation took place and a consumer's satisfaction response was the result of that evaluation (Cardozo, 1965; Oliver, 1980; Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988). Over the years, research has explored many aspects of

the purchase occasion such as the nature of satisfaction as the result of an immediate, transaction specific, evaluation of a product's/service's attributes (Tse and Wilton, 1988; Woodruff and Gardial, 1995), use consequences (Clemons and Woodruff, 1992), and the relationship between perceived performance and expectations (Anderson, 1973; LaTour and Peat, 1979).

An interesting set of questions arises related to all of these issues. What product/service attribute encounters would trigger a consumer to perceive a product's/service's performance differently, given that from the seller's perspective, nothing about their offering has changed? Similarly, what events would lead to a change in what is expected? What consequences will trigger a change in product use? And more broadly, what events trigger any evaluation at all?

The research on complaining behavior provides insights into events that might trigger a consumer to reevaluate their current supplier/brand/store. In particular, research suggests that if a consumer is forced to follow-up on a prior complaint made to a vendor about a particular problem, satisfaction is significantly lower than it would be had s/he not had to follow-up, even if the outcome is satisfactory (Trawick and Swan, 1981). Thus, the lack of rapid response by a vendor may trigger not only follow-up action by the customer but a reevaluation of the relationship. In a business-to-business setting, problems and crises occur regularly. Customers may expect to evaluate the vendor's response to those problems more so than the fact that the problems arose. In the context of triggers, those responses that are significantly out of the norm would be expected to trigger a reevaluation, as would merely hearing about a firm's lack of responsiveness from a third party.

Other events that might trigger a reevaluation are warnings by others (Bearden and Teel, 1983), sales person communication that is out of the norm (Oliver, 1980), or the product use itself (Churchill and Suprenant, 1982). As Westbrook and Oliver (1981) stated, satisfaction refers to the evaluation response to the perceived outcomes of experiences in the consumer's environment that include acquiring, consuming and disposing. The use experience itself can encompass an event that triggers the evaluation process. Significant influencers (purchasing agent's boss) might also trigger a dramatic response (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel, 1989).

In order to investigate this and the remaining four responses, an exploratory approach was taken, whereby trigger events and responses were considered very broadly. Therefore, the following set of research questions is posed:

Q2a: What types of trigger events are associated with reevaluations of products/services?

Q2b: Are abrupt or sudden events associated with reevaluations of products/services?

Motivator of Change In/Evocation of Standards. Researchers have found that consumers often compare perceived performance to certain standards. These standards act as reference points for assessing how positive or negative performance of the focal product or service is, and include, expected (Miller, 1976; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993), desired (Swan and Trawick 1980), equity (Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988), minimum tolerable (Miller, 1976; Olson and Dover, 1979), ideal, deserved (Miller, 1976; Prakash, 1984), other products and brands (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins, 1987), experienced based norms (Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1983), and industry norms (Woodruff and Gardial 1995). Some sources of information for the formation of those standards include explicit and implicit communication by the seller (Woodruff et al., 1991), word of mouth (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1993), experience (Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1983), and perceptions of alternatives (Westbrook and Reilly, 1983).

These studies raise certain questions related to trigger events. Do triggers influence the standards that consumers use to evaluate a product/service? If so, what types of triggers cause which standards to be evoked? More importantly, what causes consumers to switch from one standard to another? Information sources might play the role of a trigger event. Evaluations made by other members of the buying center about a purchasing agent's vendor choice may also trigger such a response (Lambert, Dornoff and Kernan, 1977).

Building on Miller's work (1976), unexpected experiences, product/situation learning, exposure to new information, advertising, word of mouth and sales promises might constitute triggers that change the level of at least an ideal standard, and possibly others. Miller also commented on the deserved standard as a function of the level of investment one must make in the purchase or consumption experience. This investment level could be viewed as a trigger event. If the consumer has a certain threshold above which s/he will still purchase but will be abnormally attuned to evaluating the experience, the consumer will feel s/he deserves more value for the investment. This investment level (money, time, effort) could be a trigger event if perceived as significantly out

of the ordinary.

Researchers have also suggested that multiple standards may be used in the comparison process (Cadotte, Woodruff and Jenkins, 1987; Gardial et al., 1993; Forbes, Tse and Taylor, 1986; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Wilton and Nicosia, 1986) and may differ between pre and postpurchase time frames (Gardial et al., 1994). If this is the case, what triggers a consumer to evoke certain standards at a given time? Are there certain situations, contexts or events that trigger specific bundles of standards?

In an attempt to examine this issue, the following broad research questions are posed:

Q3a: Are there associations between certain types of trigger events and specific standards of comparison used when consumers evaluate products/services?

Q3b: Do more abrupt or sudden trigger events associate with certain standards of comparison than do less abrupt triggers when consumers evaluate product/services?

Motivator of Emotion. Emotion in both the psychology and the satisfaction literature offers very rich and exciting opportunities for the exploration of trigger events. Emotion may even be the "key linking pin" binding together the consumption experience (Holbrook, 1986). Stein, Trabasso and Liwag (1993) point out that "the perception of unexpected changes or novel information about the status of particular goals is a necessary condition for eliciting emotion." (p.279). Izard (1977) states that emotion has "important and residual effects" (p. 32), and that the actions taken as a result of the emotion will influence and bias future perceptions of similar events and evaluations of those events.

Although emotion has been discussed in the satisfaction literature (Hausknecht, 1988; Hunt, 1977; Muller, Tse and Venkatasbramian, 1991; Oliver and Westbrook, 1993; Westbrook, 1982, 1987, Westbrook and Oliver, 1991; Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins, 1983), the causes of intense emotions that are relevant to postpurchase evaluations have not been explored, nor has the notion of emotion incubation. What events trigger the most intense emotions? Do those emotions

incubate or fester over time?

Essentially, emotion must be seen as something different from cognitive evaluation. And since cognitive evaluation can occur without emotion, we must explore those triggers that elicit emotional responses separately from those that elicit the evaluation process only, even if they are closely related. This raises the following research questions:

Q4a: Are certain types of trigger events associated with emotional evaluative responses?

Q4b: Are more abrupt or sudden trigger events associated with emotions during evaluation of products/services?

Change in Values. The fourth response to triggers considered in the model is that of a change in values, those beliefs centrally held by consumers that guide behavior and change relatively infrequently. As research moves from a focus primarily on satisfaction judgments to overall postpurchase evaluation processes, we have begun to explore how values influence these evaluations (Burns and Woodruff, 1992; Woodruff and Gardial, 1995).

We need to understand how these values are formed and how they change. Woodruff and Gardial (1995) state that most values are expected to change relatively infrequently. Vinson, Scott and Lamont (1977) state that global values are held near the core of the individual's system. It appears, however, that values can exist at multiple levels. A second level called domain-specific values develops through experiences in specific situations. Therefore, values at this level can be specific to relevant and related experiences and may change more frequently than core values. Most of this literature has focused on classifying values at the individual level (Gutman, 1982; Kahle, Beatty, Homer, 1986; Reynolds and Jolly, 1980) rather than identifying their sources or the nature of their changes.

Most likely because of the centrality of values, little to no effort has yet been placed on identifying and studying those critical events that cause them to change. Changes at the societal level have been discussed (Vinson, Scott and

Lamont, 1977; Williams, 1979). But changes in individual values have been untouched in the consumer literature.

In an attempt to examine this issue, the following research questions are posed:

Q5a: Are there associations between certain types of trigger events and changes in consumers' values when they evaluate products/services??

Q5b: Do more abrupt or sudden trigger events associate with changes in consumers' values than do less abrupt triggers when consumers evaluate products/services?

Motivator of Behavioral Change. Finally, behavioral changes such as an increase or decrease in product use are expected to be an outcome based on a consumer's periodic evaluation of product alternatives, as well as other factors. We are interested in seeing if any relationship exists between trigger events and these behavioral changes. Therefore, the following set of research questions is posed:

Q6a: Are certain types of trigger events associated with changes in consumers' product/service use?

Q6b: Are abrupt or sudden trigger events associated with changes in consumers' product/service use?

Means-End Hierarchy

In addition to consumers' responses to triggers, we are interested in the level of abstraction of the events themselves. In a means-end hierarchy, consumers learn that certain attributes of products are likely to lead to certain consequences (sacrifices or benefits) they deliver as a result of product/service use. Likewise, consequences are evaluated upon their ability to facilitate or inhibit the achievement of core values. It is interesting to speculate about where triggers may play a role in these means-end hierarchies. Certain attribute changes (raising the price for a service) may result in the consequence of less money available for other uses, thus triggering a

change in evaluation of the product/service. In order to examine this issue, the following research questions are posed:

Q7a: Are certain types of trigger events associated with attributes, consequences, and values, when consumers evaluate products/services?

Q7b: Do more abrupt or sudden trigger events associate with specific hierarchy levels than do less abrupt triggers when consumers evaluate products/services?

METHOD

Context

Given the preceding discussion, one of the primary objectives of this research was to begin a broad exploration of trigger events and their nature. A longitudinal study was conducted to assess, among other things, the nature of the changes taking place in the consumer's environment and the related responses. Specifically, the respondents were interviewed within the first month of product use. Approximately nine months later, follow-up interviews were conducted in order to capture any changes. For purposes of this paper, only data from the second interview will be analyzed because we were looking for experiences over time during club use after joining.

The "product" was a health and fitness center. It was chosen due to its combination of physical product and service components. This is a fairly complex product involving multiple features and high involvement at various stages of use.

Sample

Respondents for the follow-up interview were chosen based on their involvement in the initial interview. The sample size for final data analysis was 18 (90% of the 20 people interviewed in the first interview). Respondents were randomly selected from the health and fitness club member lists. Although representing a fairly broad demographic profile, the respondents were skewed towards a higher socioeconomic profile: average

age was 44 (range 27-70); 53% were female; the average income was \$50,000 (range=less than \$15,000 to greater than \$100,000); all but one respondent had at least some college education, with ten having post-graduate education; the average household size was 2.9 individuals (range 1-5); and eleven respondents' occupations were categorized as professional (including health care, sales, engineering, teaching), while other occupations included homemakers, skilled workers, and one retiree.

Interview Format

As with the initial interviews conducted with consumers close to the time they joined the health club, contact with the respondents for the second interview was made through letters on the letterhead of a local university. It reviewed issues pertinent to the study such as identifying the researchers, outlining the objectives of the study, which was to find out about consumers' health club experiences, and informing them that they would be paid for participation. A follow-up telephone call to each respondent confirmed the details, set up the interview and obtained permission to video tape the interviews.

Interviews were held at the health and fitness center and were conducted by a graduate student trained in depth interviewing techniques. An interview room was set up to provide privacy and enable videotaping of the sessions. Respondents were asked permission to tape again at the time of the interview, with this permission captured on tape. The interviewer then conducted a depth interview to probe respondents' descriptions, reactions, evaluations, and feelings with regard to the health and fitness center.

The interviews were semi-structured consisting of a series of questions common to each interview. However, the interviewer was free to probe responses and follow-up on respondent's unique observations and experiences. The questions were open-ended and provided ample opportunity for respondents to describe their experiences. **At no time during the interview were the respondents explicitly asked about triggers.** Respondents were left to mention significant events that occurred during the evaluation period as they desired.

Coding Format

The respondents' interviews were transcribed for use in protocol analysis. The transcripts were broken into "thoughts," each thought representing a distinct idea conveyed by the respondent. Due to differences in verbalization across individuals, the actual length of each thought varied across and within respondents. Two researchers independently circumscribed the thoughts within each transcript and then discussed, reconciled and agreed upon what constituted the thoughts in each transcript. A total of 4424 thoughts were identified across the eighteen transcripts, resulting in an average of 246 thoughts per subject (range 105-375).

A coding scheme was developed to identify and define processing characteristics of interest, both for this study and others which have been previously published (Gardial et al., 1993) and will not be discussed here. This coding scheme was used to classify the content of the transcript thoughts. With respect to this study, categories and definitions were created to help identify 1) references to different types of trigger events (something caused by the health center, event in respondent's personal life, event in the environment), 2) references to the speed of the change (abrupt, gradual), 3) references to a change in evaluation (trigger caused change in evaluation), 4) references to various types of comparison standards (product, other people, other situations, other time, internal ideal, marketing supplied expectations), 5) references to emotion (positive, negative), 6) references to a change in values (triggered change in respondent's personal values), 7) references to changes in use of the facility (use is higher, lower, about the same), 8) references to attributes (product, interpersonal, services, overall features), 9) references to consequences (benefits, sacrifices), and 10) references to values.

For the purposes of this paper, the data set included 355 thoughts which contained mention of a trigger event type (an unusual event perceived by the respondent to be relevant to their use of the health club and that resulted in some form of change in their relationship with the health club).

ANALYSIS

Frequency of Triggers

The relevant data for this analysis are included in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4. These are the average number of responses per respondent which fell into the respective coding categories. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for nonparametric analysis was used to test differences between means. A p value of .05 was used.

On average, these respondents mentioned unprompted trigger events 19.72 times per interview (8% of each respondent's thoughts, on average), which is high, given the nature of the concept and the fact that they were unprompted by the interviewer.

Types of Triggers

Research question 1a was whether consumers would associate various types of trigger events with product use. This was found to be the case. As can be seen in Table 1, respondents discussed all three types of trigger events defined in the coding scheme. Events that occurred in respondent's personal lives were the most often cited (mean=10.22). For example, one respondent, in discussing a daughter's use, stated that "until the flu bug hit, she was coming at least once a week." However, this mean was not found to be significantly different from the average number of thoughts associated with the health and fitness center directed triggers (mean=7.28). An example of this type of trigger used by one respondent is, "The dues went up and they took the baby-sitting (service offered by the club, previously free) as a premium piece and we just stopped using the club very much." A significant difference was found, however, between events occurring in the environment (mean=1.94, "Recently we renewed our commitment to do this...and this probably has a lot to do with the fact that the days are shorter now, which is a big positive for health clubs.") and the next highest category, things the health and fitness center did ($p < .0008$). This pattern of no significant differences between mean frequencies for club events and those for personal events but significantly less frequent mention of

environmental trigger events, repeats itself throughout the findings. In almost all cases, the significant difference involves the environmental trigger events.

Research question 1b was whether consumers associate the abruptness or unexpectedness of events in their environment with product use. Referring to Table 2, indeed consumers did mention abrupt events (mean=13.39) significantly more often than they did gradual events (mean=6.33, $p < .001$). An example of an abrupt event mentioned by one respondent is an injury resulting from using a piece of exercise equipment. A gradual event mentioned was the increase in crowdedness of the parking lot and facility over time. Each type of event triggered various responses detailed below.

Association of Triggers with Outcomes

Reevaluations. Research question 2a asked whether consumers associate various types of trigger events with reevaluations of the product. This was found to be true. On average, respondents associated trigger events with changes in their evaluations 5.67 times per interview (see Table 1). One respondent stated "I lowered my evaluation some" of the club as a result of new charges for some unique programs, such as yoga classes, on top of very high membership fees. This (product reevaluations) was the second most often associated response with trigger events, behind changes in use (mean=18.11). All changes in evaluation were associated with trigger events for all thoughts. In a broad sense, respondents discussed evaluations 58.6 times per interview, on average. This broader category, not in Table 1, includes any general evaluative statement, (e.g.: "The equipment is great."). The 5.67 mean represents changes in evaluation of the club.

An example of a trigger event causing a reevaluation of the health club was given by one respondent who took advantage of the club's policy of allowing members to temporarily place their membership on an inactive status. The respondent was considering canceling membership since he was not using it as much as he thought he should, given the cost. During the two month inactive period, he realized how much he missed it and reevaluated the facility as better than he had

Table 1
Respondents' Mean Number of Thoughts - Trigger Type
Per Coding Category
Trigger Type

Response	Club Caused	Self Caused	Environment	Other	Total in Trigger Thoughts	Total in ALL Thoughts
Change in Evaluation	3.33	2.11	0.22*	---	5.67	5.67
Standards - Overall	1.72	2.17	0.39*	0.06	4.33	43.06
Product	0.11	---	0.06	---	0.17	9.38
People	0.06	---	---	---	0.06	2.44
Situations	0.11	0.11	---	---	0.22	5.83
Point in Time	1.39	2.06	0.33	0.06	3.83	24.33
Internal Desires	0.06	---	---	---	0.06	0.78
Mktng Set Expectations	---	---	---	---	---	0.06
Emotion - Overall	0.28	0.50	---	---	0.78	10.56
Positive	0.22	0.39	---	---	0.61	6.72
Negative	0.05	0.11	---	---	0.17	3.78
Change in Values	0.22	0.61	---	---	0.83	0.83
Change in Use - Overall	6.72	9.28	1.83*	0.28	18.11	18.11
Use is higher	2.33	1.61	0.61	0.11	4.67	4.67
Use is lower	3.00*	6.50	1.11*	0.17	10.78	10.78
No change in use	1.39	1.17	0.11	---	2.67	2.67
Nature of event						
Abrupt	4.72	7.00	1.44*	0.22	13.39	13.39
Gradual	2.56	3.22	0.50*	0.05	6.33	6.33
Average for Trigger Type	7.28	10.22	1.94*	0.28	19.72	

Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test used to test for differences among pairs in rows

* Significantly different from next highest mean in row at $p < .05$

originally thought.

Research question 2b asked whether consumers associate the abruptness of events in their environments with reevaluations. This was not found. Although all changes in evaluations (mean=5.67, Table 2) were associated with trigger events, there was not a significant difference between those reevaluations associated with abrupt events (mean=2.61) and those associated with gradual events (mean=3.06, $p < .86$). An example of an abrupt event caused by the health club that triggered a consumer's change in evaluation was the awarding of a five day free guest pass. The club awarded free guest passes to members on their birthdays, and the member had a birthday in December, but wanted the pass for an important friend coming to town in November. The club provided the pass earlier than normal,

which triggered a reevaluation (in the positive direction) of the club by the consumer.

Standards. Research question 3a asked whether consumers associate various types of trigger events with standards of comparison during evaluation of products/services. This was found to be the case. On average, consumers associated comparison standards with trigger events 4.33 times per interview (see Table 1). This accounted for 10 percent of the times standards were discussed across the board (mean=43.06 over all thoughts per respondent), and it was the third most frequent response associated with trigger events, behind changes in use and reevaluations.

One respondent explained how the move into a busy time of the year (tax time and spring) triggered a comparison with alternative uses of

Table 2
Respondents' Mean Number of Thoughts - Trigger Nature
Per Coding Category
Nature of Event

Response	Abrupt Event	Gradual Event	Total in Trigger Thoughts	Total in ALL Thoughts
Change in Evaluation	2.61	3.06	5.67	5.67
Standards - Overall	2.00	2.33	4.33	43.06
Product	0.11	0.06	0.17	9.38
People	—	0.06	0.06	2.44
Situations	0.11	0.11	0.22	5.83
Point in Time	1.78	2.06	3.83	24.33
Internal Desires	—	—	0.06	0.78
Mktng Set Expectations	—	—	—	0.66
Emotion - Overall	0.72	0.06*	0.78	10.56
Positive	0.61	—	0.61	6.72
Negative	0.11	0.06	0.17	3.78
Change in Own Values	0.28	0.56	0.83	0.83
Change in Use - Overall	12.61	5.50*	18.11	18.11
Use is higher	3.61	1.06*	4.67	4.67
Use is lower	7.67	3.11*	10.78	10.78
No change in use	1.33	1.33	2.67	2.67
Total for Trigger Nature	13.39	6.33*	19.72	

Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test used to test for differences among pairs in rows

* Significantly different from next highest mean in row at $p < .05$

limited discretionary time, and the outcome of the evaluation was to use the facility less often. Another consumer explained that "before I had the operation, I played more racquet ball than I do now," reflecting a comparison of use with another point in time. A third use of a comparison standard by a respondent was his expectation of nutritional education material and classes based on observing a nutrition poster on the club's bulletin board before joining. Once he joined, he discovered that the facility didn't have any focus on nutrition education, and the poster had been taken down. In comparison to his expectations, he was "disappointed." As a final example, one respondent stated that "I guess I have gotten higher standards I think, since I have been here." Thus, the use of the facility had triggered a change

in the standard level this consumer would expect in the future from this or other facilities.

Of the standards explored (product, other people, other situations, other point in time, internal ideal, and marketing supplied expectations), comparisons to other points in time were by far the most frequently used by respondents (mean=3.83).

Research question 3b was whether consumers associated the abruptness, or suddenness, of events with standards. This was not found to be the case. Abrupt events (surgery) were associated with comparison standards (mean=2.00, Table 2) just as often as gradual events (mean=2.33, gradual increase in crowdedness of parking lot).

Emotion. Research question 4a asked whether

Table 3
Respondents' Mean Number of Thoughts - Hierarchy & Trigger Type
Per Coding Category
Trigger Type

Hierarchy Level	Club Caused	Self Caused	Environment	Other	Total in Trigger Thoughts	Total in ALL Thoughts
Attributes - Overall	5.17	5.22	0.89*	0.17	11.44	145.44
Product	1.72	2.11	0.56*	---	4.39	
Interpersonal	0.33	0.05	---	---	0.39	
Services	0.89	0.56	0.06	0.11	1.61	
Overall - no distinction	2.17	2.44	0.28*	0.06	4.90	
Consequences - Overall	1.11	0.95	---	0.05	2.11	34.50
Benefit	0.50	0.34	---	---	0.84	
Sacrifice	0.56	0.45	---	0.05	1.06	
Other	0.05	0.16	---	---	0.21	
Values - Overall	---	0.22	---	---	0.22	5.95

Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test used to test for differences among pairs in rows

* Significantly different from next highest mean in row at $p < .05$

Table 4
Respondents' Mean Number of Thoughts - Hierarchy & Nature
Per Coding Category
Nature of Event

Hierarchy Level	Abrupt Event	Gradual Event	Total in Trigger Thoughts	Total in ALL Thoughts
Attributes - Overall	7.72	3.72*	11.44	145.44
Product	3.06	1.33*	4.35	
Interpersonal	0.39	---	0.39	
Services	1.44	0.17	1.61	
Overall - no distinction	2.83	2.11	4.90	
Consequences - Overall	1.28	0.83	2.11	34.50
Benefit	0.55	0.29	0.84	
Sacrifice	0.62	0.44	1.06	
Other	0.11	0.10	0.21	
Values - Overall	0.17	0.05	0.22	5.95

Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test used to test for differences among pairs in rows

* Significantly different from next highest mean in row at $p < .05$

consumers associated various types of triggers with emotional responses. Surprisingly, this was not found to be the case. Across all respondents' thoughts, emotions were only discussed 10.56 times per interview on average (Table 1). Yet, they were associated with trigger events only a fraction of these few times, 0.78 times on average.

Within those thoughts that were associated with trigger events, no significant differences were

found among the average number of times respondents associated emotion with various trigger types. However, addressing 4b, a significant difference was found between the average number of times abrupt changes were associated with emotions (mean=0.72, Table 2) versus gradual changes (mean=0.06, $p < .002$). This lends support to the notion that something out of the ordinary must occur to elicit emotion.

Events that occur gradually do not surprise people. Abrupt ones do.

An example of an event triggering emotion resulting in a response associated with the product or service was clearly provided by one respondent. She stated that she contracted mononucleosis. "It was a major interruption in my life. It was stressful, yuck....man it really sucked...it was awful...just a bummer." As a result she used the facility less. The trigger was contracting mono. The emotion was targeted at the sickness. She later went on to state that "...I knew there was nothing I could do about it..." so her evaluation of the facility didn't change, but her use did.

Additionally, these respondents associated trigger events with positive emotions (mean=0.61, Table 1) more often than negative emotions (mean=0.17). An example of positive emotion was given by the respondent who was offered the five day free guest pass.

Changes in Personal Values. Research question 5a asked whether consumers associated changes in their values with different trigger event types. This was not found to be true. Changes in values were associated with trigger events overall slightly less than once per respondent (mean=0.83, Table 1), on average. No significant differences were found among trigger types associated with these changes.

Concerning 5b, no significant difference was found between average number of times respondents associated abrupt events with changes in values (mean=0.28, Table 2) and the average number of times they associated gradual events (mean=0.56). This lends support to the notion of the relative stability of values.

Changes in Use. Research question 6a asked whether consumers associated various trigger types with changes in use of products/services. This was found to be true. Changes in use were the most often cited response to triggers. The significant difference lies between events that occurred in the environment (mean=1.83, $p < .0008$, Table 1) and each of the other two events, those caused by the health club (mean=6.72) and events in respondents' personal lives (mean=9.28).

Examples of health club triggers changing the

level of use include increase in dues, charging for baby-sitting when it was previously free, an injury on a piece of equipment when the trainer was showing the respondent how to use the equipment, the lack of response to a respondent's suggestion for a new service, and the lack of emergency medical material (a Band-Aid) for a bleeding blister. Some examples of events respondents' stated that occurred in their personal lives triggering a change in facility use include beginning work on a house, other priorities like taxes and family taking over, becoming ill, going back to school in the evenings, and having surgery. Finally, events like the days becoming longer and construction on the route to the facility, are examples of environmental events that triggered increases or decreases in use of the facility.

Part 6b asked whether consumers associate abruptness of these events with changes in use. This was also found to be true. Respondents associated abrupt events (injury from equipment use) with changes in facility use, on average, 12.61 times per interview (see Table 2). In contrast, gradual events, (parking lot became more crowded) were only associated 5.5 times on average per interview ($p < .001$).

Within the use category, respondents discussed trigger events that caused a decrease in use (mean=10.78, Table 2) more often than they did increases in use (mean=4.72). Events in respondents' personal lives seemed to be associated more often (mean=6.5) with decrease in use than events caused by the health club (mean=3.00, $p < .008$). Increases (mean=3.67) and decreases in use (mean=7.67) were most often associated with abrupt changes as opposed to gradual ones (mean= 1.06 and 3.11 respectively, $p < .002$).

Abruptness Associated with Trigger Types. Associations between the abruptness of events and the trigger event types were also explored. Abrupt events were associated with those events in respondents' personal lives 7 times per interview on average and with health club caused events 4.72 times per interview on average (see Table 1). Although this difference is not statistically significant, the fact that respondents associated abrupt events with environmental caused events

only 1.44 times per interview on average is significantly different from the next closest category, club caused events ($p < .002$). This same pattern holds for gradual events.

Levels of Hierarchy

Question 7a asked whether consumers associated types of trigger events and abruptness of the events with different levels of the means-end hierarchy. This was found to be true. Table 3 illustrates that consumers' thoughts on critical events were concerned with attributes far more often (mean=11.44) per interview than they were with consequences (sacrifices/benefits, mean=2.11) or values (mean=0.22).

This approach reflects the broad categorization of the thought object as an attribute, consequence or value. Whereas earlier we were discussing responses to trigger events, here we were attempting to identify at what level in the means-end hierarchy consumers think when they discuss the events themselves. For example, a rise in price is an attribute change resulting in a set of responses that may include less frequent use of the facility. Of the attributes explored, respondents discussed overall features (mean=4.9, Table 3) or product attributes (mean=4.39) most often in the context of trigger events. "They offer a lot of options," and "they raised the fees" are examples. Service attributes were discussed 1.61 times per interview on average.

An injury is an example of a consequence resulting from some event (that may or may not have happened in the gym) that may also result in a change in use of the facility. This consequence may be a trigger itself or a response to a trigger. Concerning these consequences as triggers, respondents discussed sacrifices (mean=1.06) more than they did benefits (mean=0.84).

Respondents did not speak of values as triggers very often (mean=0.22). One consumer said that a family member reminded him of the value of spending more time with the family, thus triggering him to use the club less. Another example of values as a trigger would be a consumer's visit to the doctor which reveals a need to get in better physical condition. The consumer may now value health and exercise more, thus triggering an increase in use of the

health club. This is different from a change in values as a response to a trigger event. An illustration of the health club triggering a change in personal values is gained from one respondent who stated that he "had more respect for the immune system and personal health now" as a result of using the health club. This latter situation, value change as a response to a trigger event, has already been addressed under responses.

Research question 7b asked whether more abrupt trigger events associated with specific hierarchy levels than do less abrupt triggers when consumers evaluate products/services. This was found to be true. Abrupt trigger events were associated with attributes significantly more often (mean=7.72, Table 4) than gradual trigger events (mean=3.72, $p < .003$). The differences between abrupt trigger events associated with consequences (mean=1.28) and gradual events associated with consequences (mean=0.83) were not significant ($p < .09$). Neither were the differences between abrupt trigger events associated with values (mean=0.17) and gradual trigger events associated with values (mean=0.05, $p < .87$).

CONCLUSIONS

Limitations

Several limitations of this study must be noted. These results may be unique to this specific product category (a health and fitness center), the sample of respondents (fairly high socioeconomic status), and their particular stage in the consumption process (early stages). Additionally, the entire process of depth interviewing and coding is very subjective, although inter coder agreement helps to correct for this. There may also be information lost in the transcription process, e.g., emotion, inflection and intensity. Therefore, this information is not necessarily captured in the coding scheme. Emotion was only coded if an emotion word ("that excited me") was used. Finally, these analyses are based on associations within each thought. It might be necessary to reexamine the transcripts in broader groups of thoughts in order to capture the richness that is there.

Support for Triggers

Overall, these findings support the concepts of triggers and responses. Consumers do discuss critical events that impact their evaluations, standards of comparison and use of products and services. These respondents did not associate emotion very often with these critical events. This finding is surprising and could be due to several factors. It could be due to the extreme rigor and strictness with which we subjected the coding of emotion. Non-verbal cues were removed. It could also be due to the fact that events associated with the use of a health club do not elicit much emotion, people do not generally like to speak of their emotions in an interview, that the emotions were fairly transient and not recalled at the time of interview, or that no event occurred during this time frame powerful enough to elicit strong emotions. These respondents also did not often associate triggers with changes in personal values. This supports the notion of personal values being relatively stable.

The interesting findings are not that trigger events occur, but in the changes they evoke. Clearly, consumers will alter their use of a product or service if the vendor changes something unexpectedly. In this instance, raising prices unexpectedly, charging for services that were free, closing facilities like tennis courts for construction, eliminating a service such as being able to put a membership on temporary hold, all dramatically impacted consumers' use of the facility. Additionally, changes in consumers' personal lives dramatically alter use. These events also altered consumers' evaluations of the product/service and caused them to make comparisons with other points in time, expectations, and other standards.

Another interesting finding is that consumers discuss events in their personal lives as impacting product related responses just as often as they do health club events. But they speak of outside environmental events much less often. This may have something to do with controllability. Events that can be directly attributed to a cause (the club or oneself) have greater impact and are more likely to be discussed than events out of anyone's control. It may also have to do with recall. Consumers may simply better recall events that

they can attribute causality to.

We also found that consumers discuss attributes more often than they do consequences or values. For this product, of the consequences discussed, physical, time and monetary

Table 5
Sample of Triggers from Study

Trigger of Type
<p>In Health Club's Realm</p> <p><u>Negative events:</u></p> <p>Increase in fees Charge for services previously free Lack of response to suggestions Lack of emergency medical support Injury on equipment (blame club) Remove services Increase in crowds Construction in club High price of joining</p> <p><u>Positive events:</u></p> <p>Free guest passes Option to place membership on inactive Add services Listened to consumer's needs Staff gave positive reinforcement Results of physical therapy</p>
<p>In Consumer's Realm</p> <p>Surgery Illness Reduction in available time Move closer/nearer to club Injury Change in value of own health Found other exercise options Decision to train for hiking event Gaining experience on equipment Decided to go back to school Reflection of importance while membership was on hold Positive experience on first use</p>
<p>In External Environment</p> <p>Days shorter/longer Weather Construction Busy time of year (tax, holiday)</p>

consequences were referenced most. Thus, any dramatic changes in attributes of the product or service should be examined in light of potential strongly desired or strongly undesired physical, temporal or monetary consequences. These consequences will dramatically effect product related responses, such as an injury due to poor

training on the equipment, excess time due to crowds, excess money due to fee increases, or on the positive side, delight due to personalized services, positive motivation due to effective use of equipment, or extra value as a result of added services at no charge.

We have attempted to demonstrate through the extant literature in the customer satisfaction and related areas, as well as exploratory research, that trigger events are crucial to our understanding of the consumption process. This work suggests that certain events trigger evaluations, emotions, and changes in, or use of, comparison standards, all crucial responses to satisfaction theory, postpurchase evaluation theory and an understanding of overall loyalty. An initial classification was offered, based on the literature, in order to provide a starting point to explore trigger events and responses to them. A snapshot classification of some of the triggers mentioned by our respondents is provided in Table 5.

Future Research

This study merely opens the door to research addressing the concept of trigger events. At this stage, we are attempting to explore the broad categories of trigger events that impact consumers' evaluations of products/services. Future research must focus on developing an acceptable definition of a trigger event. The one presented here is a place to start. Along this line, classifications and measurement methods for trigger events must be developed. The primary classification method used here was the source (consumer, vendor, environment) and the abruptness (abrupt, gradual) of change. We began to look at another method that might be useful, the means-end hierarchy (attribute changes, consequences, value changes), as trigger groupings. Other classifications might also be helpful, such as the level of impact in terms of finances or time, the level of impact relative to one consumer, one family, one company, an entire industry or an entire nation.

We must also expand the basic response model presented here. This will include exploring both mediators and moderators. The literature discusses processes that might be viewed as influencers to the trigger event responses. For instance,

involvement (Bolting and Woodruff, 1988; Oliva, Oliver and MacMillan, 1992), experience (Day, 1976), attribution (Folkes, 1984), context (Oliver, 1980; Woodruff, 1993) an individual's perception of the event, psychological and physiological characteristics of the individual along with symbolic and social meanings of the event (Oliver, 1980), degree of normalcy of the event (Swan and Trawick, 1994), the level of controllability of the cause and the stability (variability) of the cause (Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988), may all influence the responses to critical events. Equity theory which has been shown to mediate the effect of inputs and outcomes on satisfaction (Blodgett, 1994) and the length of patronage, which has been shown to be positively related to repurchase intentions (Rust and Williams, 1994), may also influence responses to trigger events.

Essentially, events will be perceived differently and thus responded to differently depending on these and other mediators. Research should begin to investigate the relationships among trigger events and corresponding responses taking into account the mediating variables.

Marketers can also begin to look for those events that trigger changes in customers' evaluations and use of their products/services. Are there events planned by the firm or a competitor that may come as a surprise to the customer? If so, what might their responses be (emotionally, how they compare the services to competitors', their evaluation of the firm, what they value, and future repatronage)? Marketers must identify those events that arouse their customers' interests (positive and negative) and decide what to do with that information. Is there some way the firm can help the customer avoid those events that will trigger undesired responses and realize desired ones? By understanding how consumers respond to various classes of events, marketers and researcher may better serve their own as well as their customers' needs.

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