

CONSUMER COMPLAINTS AS MARKET INTELLIGENCE: ORIENTING CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper renews calls for the examination of consumer complaint information as part of the firm's marketing information mix. Complaints, a form of customer initiated communication, are a potentially rich source of marketing information, and can complement other types of marketing data. To this end, we highlight the importance of organizational level complaint management for practitioners and academics; place complaint information in relationship to organizational learning, total quality management, and market/customer orientation; describe an organizational level benefit-cost framework relating to perceptions of information use; and offer propositions related to factors that could influence benefit-cost perceptions of complaint information use.

INTRODUCTION

Shorter product life cycles, increased customer expectations, greater awareness of the long-term value of a customer, and heightened intensity of global competition all contribute to an increasing academic and managerial emphasis on information use in marketing. This focus is evident in a spate of recent articles in the academic literature (e.g., Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992; Menon and Varadarajan 1992; Jaworski and Kohli 1993) and in the current Marketing Science Institute Priorities (1992, 1994). It has long been recognized that a firm's strategies for handling and processing information will impact its future survival and growth potential (Deshpande 1982). Nevertheless, U.S. companies have been criticized for ignoring the potential of information systems for influencing strategy as a means of improving organizational performance (Cole 1985).

Marketing information can take many forms. Ross and Oliver (1985) illustrate differences between two primary categories of market information: firm-initiated and consumer-initiated.

Firm-initiated market information, typically under the auspices of market research departments, involves formal market research including the increasingly important assessment of customer satisfaction. Key characteristics of firm-initiated information is the organization's high degree of control over individuals sampled and the nature of the information obtained. In contrast, consumer-initiated market information, typically under the auspices of consumer affairs departments, includes compliments, suggestions, requests for information, and complaints. Self-selectivity is a key characteristic of these forms of information and, as such, the degree of "up front" organizational control is much less than with firm-initiated information (Ross and Oliver 1985).

Effectively leveraging information for competitive advantage requires that all sources of data germane to a problem be incorporated into the organizational decision process. However, most work to date has studied the use of firm-initiated market research information (e.g., Moorman, *et al.* 1992; Menon and Varadarajan 1992).

Consumer complaints, a form of consumer-initiated market information, are a potentially valuable source of information that can be used to make strategic or tactical adjustments as customers provide feedback about products or services. While it has been acknowledged that effective complaint management is an important component for corporate profitability and long-term customer loyalty (Fornell and Westbrook 1984; Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987), little is known about the integration of complaint information into organizational decision making (Fornell and Westbrook 1979). Most research related to consumer complaints has focused on the *consumer*, i.e., attitudes, knowledge, motivation, characteristics, or behaviors of complainers (e.g., Singh 1988) or on *complaint handling/redress procedures*, i.e., individual level compensation issues/procedures employed by companies (e.g., Clark, Kaminski, and Rink 1992). In contrast, little published research has examined *the*

integration of complaint information in organizational behavior. True *complaint management* considers not only individual-level complaint handling but also organizational-level acquisition and use of complaint information (Fornell and Westbrook 1979). For example, after changing peppermint vendors, Celestial Seasonings found through customer complaints that the new formulation in one of their flavors was less preferred by customers, and they were able to correct the problem at the supplier level (Modello 1994). Ross and Oliver (1985) provide examples of the use of complaint data in the quality assurance realm (e.g., correcting product and packaging defects and ambiguous labels, instructions, and company policies).

Consumer complaints are highly relevant sources of market information. As such, they warrant the attention of managers and academics for a number of reasons. First, complaints tend to represent a major form of unsolicited communication between the customer and the organization. (Fornell and Westbrook 1979). However, Ross and Oliver (1985), Richins (1985), and Chadwick (1991) also note limitations associated with the use and interpretability of unsolicited complaint information. In particular, they argue that complaints may not be representative of all consumers. Richins (1985) also suggests that complaints are underreported in some product classes (low cost, low involvement products) and overreported in others (high involvement products).

These concerns suggest caution must be used when evaluating complaint data. On the other hand, complainers also tend to be more frequent users of the product/service category and more affluent than a random sample of users (Chadwick 1991). Thus, these are customers that a firm should want to keep. As noted above, effective responses to complaints can prevent a customer from switching brands or suppliers. This is a critical benefit, since the cost of obtaining new customers is usually substantially greater than satisfying a current dissatisfied customer (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987; Clark, Kaminski, and Rink 1992). One might even argue that the *quality* of market share (in terms of loyalty and repeat purchase) is as important as the *size* of market share since customer loyalty has been empirically

related to profits (Reichheld and Sasser 1990; Heskett, *et al.* 1994). Additionally, this information can be used to adjust strategy or tactics to keep the product in alignment with market requirements (Fornell and Westbrook 1984; Band 1991) and as a means of improving customer satisfaction (Claycomb and Miller 1993).

Second, complaints tend to be more specific and concrete in nature, and thus offer less interpretational difficulty than assessments of quality and satisfaction. In addition, complaints are typically offered voluntarily to the company without the expense of market research (although expenses may include a consumer affairs representative and an 800 number).

Last, as Piercy and Morgan (1993) argue, it is important to bring the measurement of satisfaction away from a strict customer focus and measure the organization's ability to deliver satisfaction. Instituting true complaint management is one means of accomplishing this task. Addressing complaints affects the company's ability to satisfy customers immediately (through equitable resolution) and on a continuing basis (by adjusting products and procedures to ensure that products meet customer needs).

Thus, the effective use of complaints is important for both managers and academics. Moreover, it is germane to three interrelated areas where marketing links with other parts of the organization to meet key strategic objectives: organizational learning, total quality management, and the development of a customer/market driven organization. These are discussed separately below. Following is a description of a conceptual framework explaining the use of complaint information by the firm.

Organizational Learning

With one-third of the 1970 Fortune "500" extinct by the mid-1980's, DeGeus (1988, p.71) proclaimed " ... the ability to learn faster than competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage." Garvin (1993, p.80) defines a "learning-organization" as " ... an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights." Thus, a learning organization requires systems that support

efficient knowledge transfer activities which ultimately allow for their integration into daily operations.

Argyris and Schon (1978) conceptualize organizational learning as involving the detection and correction of error. They describe one form of error-detection/correction, single-loop learning, that permits an organization to continue its current policies. (Conventional individual level complaint handling would fall within this perspective.) However, they also describe a form of error-detection/correction, double-loop learning, that allows for modification of a firm's policies and objectives. (An organizational level complaint management perspective would be consistent with this form of learning.) Complaint management activities offer important inputs to corporate planning that impact a company's ability to learn and adapt. Complaints give the organization feedback about practices or product features that are not in conformance with customer needs. As Plymire (1991) observed, complaints are a means of developing new ways of doing things for the customer.

Total Quality Management

The quality initiative permeates virtually every business sector and affects large and small companies. Organizations are utilizing quality improvements as a means of gaining competitive advantage, increasing market share, and enhancing profitability (Band 1991; Kotler 1994). A cornerstone of this movement is that quality has no meaning except as defined by the customer. While a customer orientation may be important, quality management implies much more. For instance, applying the total quality approach involves organizational level analysis and improvements in information and analysis, strategic planning, and management of processes (Leonard and Sasser 1983; Cravens, Holland, Lamb, and Moncrief 1988).

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the highest national recognition of quality a U.S. company can achieve, explicitly recognizes information and analysis in its award criteria. Specifically, the scope and management of quality and performance data, competitive comparisons and benchmarking, and analysis and uses of

company-level data are included in the information and analysis component. The analysis of company-level data is clearly viewed as "central intelligence", as it accounts for two-thirds of the possible points awarded for information and analysis (*Profiles of Malcolm Baldrige Award Winners* 1992). Further, ISO 9000, the most prominent international quality standard, also recognizes the impact of complaint management in quality assurance. This is reflected in the requirement that ISO 9001 certified firms must have a tracking system in place for complaints and their remedy (Lamprecht 1992). Considered in this light, the establishment and/or evaluation of organizational complaint management is a valuable component of a firm's total quality initiative.

Market/Customer Orientation

Conceptualization of a market orientation includes interrelated components: customer orientation and interfunctional coordination (Narver and Slater 1989; Kohli and Jaworski 1990). Other views consider market and customer orientation as synonymous (Deshpande, Farley, and Webster 1993). In explicating the market orientation construct, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) view market intelligence generation and dissemination, and a company's responsiveness to market intelligence as integral elements of a market orientation.

One potentially important component of market intelligence is consumer complaint management. Organizational generation and dissemination of, and responsiveness to, complaint information could significantly enhance implementation of a company's market orientation because it keeps the firm close to product or service shortcomings in the eyes of the customer. Considering the benefits of effectively using these data, Plymire (1991, p.39) contends that "... the surest road to a customer-focused culture is through increased complaints." Therefore firms should attempt to generate and manage complaint feedback effectively.

Nevertheless, too many companies take exactly the opposite approach and employ "defensive complaint handling." These companies deal with complaints at the surface level and protect the organization from "hostile" consumers (Fornell

and Westbrook 1979). Plymire (1991) has noted how most employees are discouraged from routing complaints to superiors. In contrast, complaints can be viewed as ways to serve customers better, thus offering potential new opportunities. Further, conferring the status of "important feedback" on complaint information sends a clear signal throughout a company that it is truly customer oriented (Plymire 1991).

Summary

Effective organizational acquisition and dissemination of complaint information can facilitate organizational learning and total quality management, and aid in the implementation of a market/customer orientation. However, Fornell and Westbrook (1984) found the consumer relations departments in organizations, where complaint information is usually received, become less involved in marketing decisions as the relative volume of complaints increases. This relationship can hurt the firm, since the information is most critical when there is a high volume of complaints. They described this phenomenon as a "vicious cycle." Management needs to remedy some component of the marketing plan. Yet, if the receivers of complaints are withdrawing from the decision process, valuable intelligence is lost and complaints continue to increase because the root problems are not being addressed. Kasper (1985) noted the lack of systematic efforts aimed at integrating complaint information in firms' strategic decision making. He found that complaint data entering firms in his study often did not reach all decision makers, even when formal complaint registration systems were in place. From this, he concluded that complaint information was not being used optimally.

The Fornell and Westbrook research is an important "first-step" in complaint management research because it identified the relationship between complaint volume and the involvement of the consumer affairs department in marketing decision making. They discussed these results in terms of intraorganization communication issues relating to message sender distortion, message channel barriers, and defensive avoidance on the part of message receivers, and suggested these factors negatively influenced the integration of

complaint information in marketing decision making.

This paper extends the Fornell and Westbrook explanation and incorporates consumer information processing principles, i.e., benefit/cost analysis (Russo 1988) to describe this breakdown. While we acknowledge the significance of organizational communication issues identified by Fornell and Westbrook, our perspective moves beyond their work by explaining the dynamic interplay of salient cognitions (i.e., benefit/cost perceptions) related to organizational information use. As such, we view these cognitions as potential sources of the intraorganizational communication biases and barriers discussed by Fornell and Westbrook (1984). In addition, we utilize contemporary findings relating to marketing information use as a means of delineating antecedents of benefit/cost perceptions that were unavailable at the time of the Fornell and Westbrook (1984) effort.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section of the paper proposes a framework that explains organizational perspectives regarding the use of complaint information. The orientation is adapted from Russo's (1988) normative framework relating to consumers' acquisition and use of information. This conceptual perspective is used as a starting point because we see parallels between the dynamics of consumer benefit-cost tradeoffs and organizational benefit-cost tradeoffs. Although specific perceptual issues differ between consumer and organizational information use perspectives, it is the dynamic interplay among perceptions which we view as offering heuristic value to efforts aimed at understanding organizational use (nonuse) of information.

The framework is based on the assumption that organizational acquisition and use of information is related to *the ratio of perceived expected benefits to perceived expected costs*. As will be explained below, while the benefit-cost analysis may not always be perfectly rational or overt, it will be operative within an organization. As such, an explicit delineation of benefit and cost perceptions and factors which impact them, will contribute to a better understanding of organizational use (nonuse) of complaint

information.

In attempting to examine organizational complaint management, it is important to develop potential benefits and costs of information from an organizational perspective (see Table 1). Further, it is equally important to recognize that benefits/costs can be tangible (i.e., tied to more concrete/overt/formal consequences/ processes) or intangible (i.e., related to more psychological/covert/informal consequences/ processes). Note that, in this perspective, the impact of intangible benefits/costs can be just as important as the impact of tangible benefits/costs on information utilization.

We now offer a comparison of organizational perceptions of marketing research relative to complaint information as a means of illustrating the benefit-cost framework. In terms of *tangible benefits*, both market research and complaint information can be perceived as inputs which ultimately improve organizational performance. Within our perspective, we include both process and outcome aspects. For example, complaint information can be used to enhance strategic decision making which may help marketing managers produce and deliver better products that, in turn, can contribute to higher sales and

profitability for the firm. As noted in the introduction, loyal customers can have a dramatic effect on profitability.

With respect to *tangible costs*, both market research and complaint information have monetary costs associated with collection, collation/computation, and interpretation procedures. However, it can be argued that, as noted earlier, given the nature of complaint processes (i.e., complaints freely provided), monetary collection costs associated with complaint information will be considerably less than monetary collection costs associated with market research. Thus, given the above analysis of tangible benefits/costs, outcomes are not so clearly in favor of market research in comparison to complaint information - at least not to the degree needed to explain the large disparity between organizational use of market research compared to complaint information. It is our contention that the "perceptual gap" between these two forms of organizational information widens considerably when analyzing *intangible benefits/costs*.

In this framework, organizations are more likely to perceive *intangible benefits* to market research usage relative to complaint information usage. That is, market research is viewed as

Table 1
Benefits and Costs of Using Organizational Information

	Benefits	Costs
Tangible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Improve product/service quality (via improved products and increases in customer loyalty) * Enhance strategic decision making * Enhance strategy implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Monetary (employees, overhead, etc.)
Intangible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Reduce uncertainty re: decision making * Satisfaction w/completeness of decision * Self justification * Positive experiential value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Effort * Time * Dissatisfaction w/completeness of decision * Inability to self justify * Negative experiential value

reducing uncertainty with respect to decision making. Additional intangible benefits in favor of market research (compared to complaint information) relate more to the decision process. Organizational decision makers may be more satisfied with the way the decision is made when that decision is based on market research. Market research also allows organizational decision makers to justify their behavior. Finally, as a component in pre-decisional, decisional, and post-decisional processes, market research can help facilitate formal and informal communication, and thus is perceived as possessing positive experiential value.

In contrast to market research, it is our contention that organizations are more likely to perceive *intangible costs* associated with complaint information. One important perceived intangible cost is effort cost (i.e., physical and mental) with respect to managing/integrating complaint information into organizational decision making. Closely related is the time utilized in managing this type of information and the associated opportunity costs. Additional intangible costs are the "flip side" of their intangible benefit counterparts. Dissatisfaction with the decision process and an inability to "comfortably" justify decisions are more likely to be associated with complaint information. Complaint information, by its very nature, is likely to be threatening to the organization and may produce frustrating interactions between individuals (e.g., consumer/customer service representative and/or customer service rep/customer service supervisor) and therefore is perceived as possessing negative experiential value. This is one possible interpretation of the Fornell and Westbrook (1984) study.

In summary, it is proposed that organizations employ a benefit-cost analysis to determine whether information in general, and complaint information in particular, will be acquired and used. In this process, perceived benefits and costs can be intangible or tangible; perceived benefits and costs are relative and can be traded off; analyses can be imperfect; and perceptions are subject to the biases of decision makers.

Based on the foregoing discussion of organizational level benefit-cost analysis regarding information usage, a key question is: What factors

increase/decrease the likelihood of certain perceptions (i.e., benefits/costs) related to complaint information use? Figure 1 outlines several factor domains rooted in extant literature which are proposed to influence benefit-cost perceptions related to consumer complaint utilization.

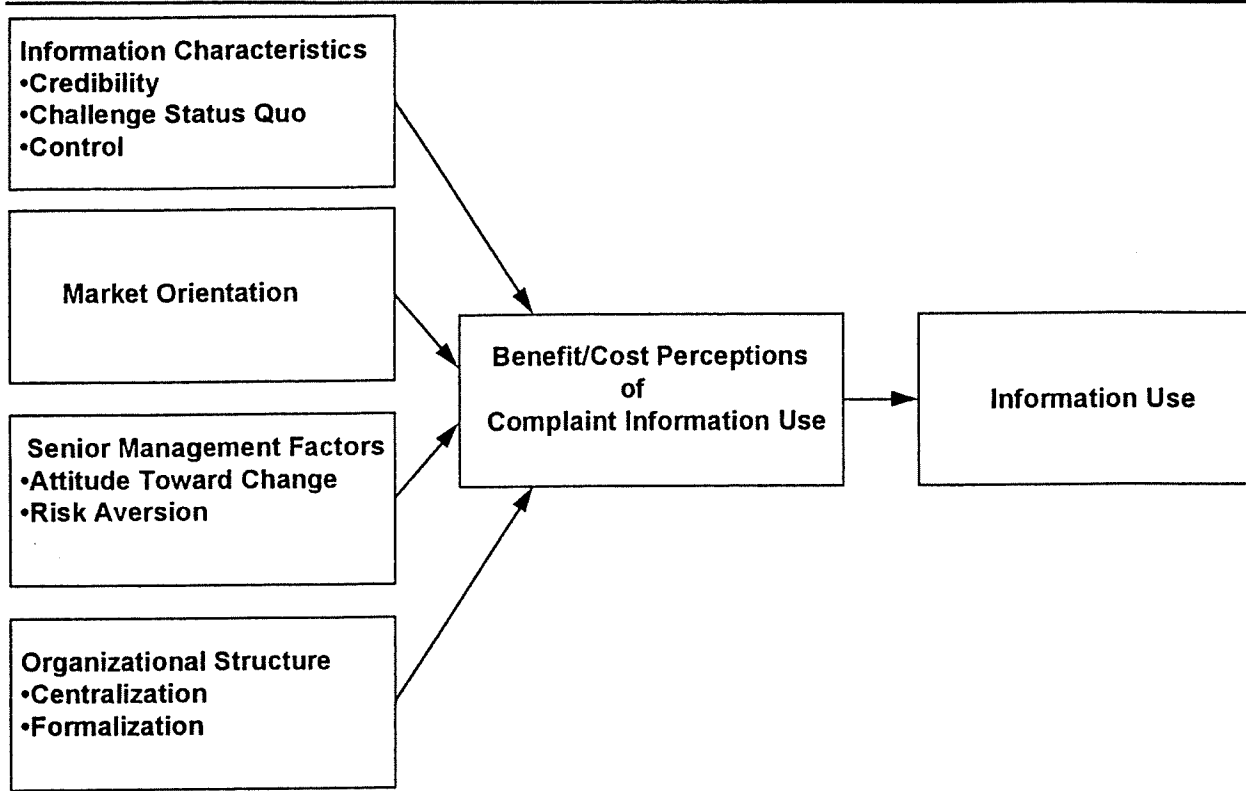
Information Characteristics

Both the nature and source of information can impact its use. The literature suggests that responsiveness to information is likely to be related to *credibility* (expertise and trustworthiness) (Petty and Cacioppo 1981; Zaltman and Moorman 1988), the *political acceptability* of the information, and the extent to which it *challenges the status quo* (Deshpande and Zaltman 1982). Another important factor is *control*. We suggest that organizations are more likely to be responsive to information to the extent that it is more under their control. Earlier we noted the disparity between firm and consumer-initiated information in terms of the degree of organizational control (Ross and Oliver 1985). Clearly, complaint information is more likely to be perceived by organization decision makers as less credible, more likely to challenge the status quo, and less under their control in comparison to other forms of information (i.e., market research). Such perceptions are likely to contribute to the perception of intangible costs as opposed to benefits associated with information use (i.e., distrust, frustration, dissatisfaction with the nature of the information and its subsequent use) which, in turn, is likely to result in the dysfunctional use or nonuse described by Fornell and Westbrook (1984). Formally we propose that:

P1: The lower the perceived credibility of the information source, the greater the perceived costs relative to perceived benefits of complaint information use by the organization.

P2: The greater the perceived challenge to the status quo, the greater the perceived costs relative to perceived benefits of complaint information use by the organization.

Figure 1
Factors Influencing Benefit/Cost Perception in the Use of Complaint Information



P3: The lower the perceived control over the information, the greater the perceived costs relative to perceived benefits of complaint information use by the organization.

Market Orientation

The market orientation of a firm is likely to have consequences for information utilization. As previously noted earlier, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) view market intelligence generation and dissemination as well as a company's responsiveness to market intelligence as integral elements of a market orientation. A potentially important component of market intelligence is consumer complaints. Organizational generation and dissemination of, and responsiveness to, complaint information could significantly enhance implementation of a company's market orientation. A firm that has not adopted and effectively implemented a market orientation is likely to perceive costs (intangible as well as tangible) rather than benefits associated with using consumer

information which, in turn, are likely to result in nonuse of consumer information. It follows that:

P4: The lower the market orientation of a firm, the greater the perceived costs relative to perceived benefits of complaint information use by the organization.

Senior Management Factors

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) have observed the powerful impact of senior management on an organization. More specifically, an individual's positive attitude toward change and the willingness of top managers to take risks have been linked to a willingness to innovate (Rogers 1983) and to junior managers responsiveness to customer needs (Kohli and Jaworski 1990). Hence, the *attitude of senior management toward change* as well as *managers' risk aversion* are likely to play significant roles in organizational complaint information use. When management holds a negative attitude toward change and is risk averse,

it is likely to perceive intangible costs as opposed to benefits associated with complaint information use (i.e., view the nature and use of the information as threatening). This is likely to result in the dysfunctional use or nonuse of information. Thus, it is proposed that:

P5: The more negative the attitude toward change of senior management, the greater the perceived costs relative to perceived benefits of complaint information use by the organization.

P6: The greater the risk aversion of senior management, the greater the perceived costs relative to perceived benefits of complaint information use by the organization.

Organizational Structure

Two aspects of organizational structure, *centralization* (i.e., the degree of lack of delegation/delegation of decision making authority in a firm) and *formalization* (i.e., the degree to which rules do/do not define relations and communications in a firm) have been found to be inversely related to information utilization (Hage and Aiken 1970; Deshpande and Zaltman 1982, 1984; Jaworski and Kohli 1993). We believe these dimensions of organizational structure should also be similarly related to complaint utilization. In organizations where centralization and formalization predominate, more perceived costs (intangible as well as tangible) relative to perceived benefits associated with using complaint information should also exist. This, in turn, is likely to result in the nonuse of complaint information. Therefore, we propose that:

P7: The greater the centralization, the greater the perceived costs relative to perceived benefits of complaint information use by the organization.

P8: The greater the formalization, the greater the perceived costs relative to perceived benefits of complaint information use by the organization.

CONCLUSION

This paper focuses attention on a potentially significant area for future research - organizational use of complaint information. As noted, more effective complaint management can yield benefits for the firm. Yet, previous literature has suggested that this information is often underutilized, especially in situations where complaints are large in number or importance and remedial action should be taken quickly. With this focus, we highlight the importance of complaint information to practitioners and academics as well as relate complaint information to organizational learning, total quality management, and market/customer orientation contexts. As part of the call for the systematic exploration of organizational use (nonuse) of complaint information, we also offer an initial benefit-cost framework and propositions related to several factors which can influence benefit-cost perceptions of complaint information use.

Future efforts in this area could extend the proposed conceptual framework by integrating additional factors which might influence benefit-cost perceptions. Complaint typology/process and information typology/process research (i.e., similarities and differences between complaint information and processing and other types of organizational information and processing) could logically follow. Empirical work could include field interviews with managers as a means of determining "cause-effect" maps of managers (as done by Kohli and Jaworski 1990) and more structured survey methodologies to examine various propositions. Another potentially interesting area for investigation is the relationship between different industry and marketing situations and complaint management. As Richins (1985) observed, the volume of complaints differs among product categories. It is possible that complaint handling varies among categories as well.

In conclusion, if current market trends hold, an organization's growth and perhaps survival will depend on its utilization of information. Complaints are important sources of information that should be formally incorporated into a firm's marketing intelligence base. As such, marketing researchers should begin to systematically examine organizational level use (nonuse) of consumer

complaint information. Timely use of customer feedback is essential in rapidly changing markets, and understanding barriers to utilization can benefit both firms and customers.

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