

BRAND AND STORE AVOIDANCE: THE BEHAVIORAL EXPRESSION OF DISSATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

Brand or store avoidance is the intentional refusal to buy/use a brand or shop/buy at a store. Within the framework of exit, voice, and loyalty, avoidance is persisting exit. Based on a convenience sample of 333 participants, this study introduces the concept of brand/store avoidance. It documents the existence of avoidance by gathering consumers' stories. It looks at the content of these stories to see how different complaint types relate to different store and product categories. It gives an indication of the scope of avoidance behavior within and across store categories.

INTRODUCTION

Personal introspection coupled with discussions with others quickly brings one to the realization that there are some brands and stores we repeatedly use and there are other brands and stores that we intentionally refuse to use. When we repeatedly use the same brand or store we refer to it as brand or store loyalty. When we intentionally refuse to use a brand or store we refer to it as brand or store avoidance. In some cases, what appears to be brand or store loyalty is just repetitive behavior and not purposive. What appears to be avoidance may also be repetitive and not purposive. True brand or store loyalty and avoidance involve intentional positive and negative purchase decisions and are not just chance behaviors.

In the consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior literature there are a number of related concepts that refer to individuals' reactions to unsatisfactory consumer experiences. These concepts include exit, voice, and grudgeholding. Exit and voice are usually mild actions, simply leaving the store for now or telling the seller or others of your dissatisfaction.

Exit and voice have been common topics since Hirschman (1970) introduced them.

Grudgeholding is extreme exit, it carries a heavy emotional loading, and it persists over long periods of time. Grudgeholding, though a newer concept, has face validity, is evident through introspection for many people, and has been documented in the Hunt studies (Hunt, Hunt, & Hunt, 1988; Hunt & Hunt, 1990). Grudgeholding is usually a composite of voice and exit exacerbated by extreme emotional upset. Avoidance includes grudgeholding, but is usually much milder. Just as most loyalty is not extreme, most of it just occurring, so also most avoidance is not extreme, and is certainly not grudgeholding.

In contrast to these other terms, avoidance is persisting exit, it has little emotional involvement, and it is primarily cognitive in nature. Exit, while often co-occurring with voice, can also occur independently. Avoidance is an exit behavior, and, like other exit behaviors, may co-occur with voice, but can also occur independently. This paper studies the broad area of persistent exit -- brand or store avoidance -- where the consumer not only exits the store or brand, but continues that exit over time. Regular avoidance differs from the extreme of grudgeholding, we propose, because it does not carry the heavy emotional content of grudgeholding. Even twenty-five years later, grudgeholders remember the emotional upset and get upset again when they think of the grudgeholding event. Whatever emotion exists for avoidance is mild to moderate and is not the dominant motivational influence.

The purpose of this study is to (a) introduce the concept of brand or store avoidance behavior, (b) document the existence of brand and store avoidance by gathering consumers' stories, (c) look at the content of these stories to see how different complaint types relate to different store and product categories, and (d) obtain some indication of the scope of the behavior within and

across store categories.

METHOD

Subjects

Undergraduate students in a consumer behavior class at Brigham Young University, participating in an optional class research project, invited people to participate in a study. To assure a dispersion of ages, students were asked to find two respondents from each of four age categories: 15-18, 19-24, 25-55, and 56 and older. Students could substitute two individuals from other age categories in place of an individual missing in any age category. Thirty-eight students produced 333 questionnaire respondents. There were 63 subjects in the 15-18 age range (18.9%), 112 subjects in the 19-24 age range (33.6%), 113 subjects in the 25-55 age range (33.9%), and 45 in the 56 and older age range (13.5%). Of the 333 participants, 207 were females (62.2%) and 126 were males (37.8%).

Procedure

Students approached people and asked them if they would be willing to participate in a study of consumer avoidance. These people tended to be acquaintances of the students. Students emphasized the need for complete and detailed descriptions of the respondents' brand or store avoidance experiences. Respondents returned the completed questionnaires to the students who turned them in to the course instructor. A summary of the findings was provided to those participants who requested it. Students discussed the findings in class during the discussion of consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior.

Instrument

The instrument consisted of five stapled sheets of paper. The first sheet contained the questionnaire instructions, a place for the respondent's name, address, and phone number, a box to check to request a summary of the findings, and a place for students to write their name so they could get credit for the completed

questionnaire.

The questionnaire instructions explained that while much has been written about store loyalty, it was possible that the opposite might also exist -- when a consumer deliberately refuses to buy a brand or shop at a store year after year. We asked respondents to tell us about three brands or stores they intentionally avoided. They needed to be still buying that type of product or at that type of store, but never buy that specific brand or at that specific store. Respondents were told to be as complete as possible in their account of each situation. This was neutrally worded to maximize the variety of different types of stories that could be told.

Subjects' addresses and phone numbers were required so they could be contacted to obtain missing information or clarify stories. This identifying information was not entered in the data file and the questionnaires were destroyed when the study was completed.

The middle three sheets were printed on both sides. On the front of the sheet space was provided for naming the brand or store and the type of product or store. Approximately two-thirds of this side of the page was lined space for subjects to write the story of why they avoid the brand or store.

On the back of the sheet eight questions were asked that specifically related to the story written on the front of the sheet. This material has not yet been analyzed.

Analysis

The three examples of store or brand avoidance provided by respondents resulted in a total of 999 stories. These stories were categorized by the reason given for avoiding that brand or store. Some of the stories seemed to involve only one reason, while others mentioned more than one. Only the primary reason was included in this analysis. Stories were classified by reason into nine different categories:

1. "Product quality" includes poor quality, the product didn't work, was contaminated, tasted bad or wrong, made me sick, etc.
2. "Repair" includes refusal to repair, slow, incorrectly done, poor quality, etc.
3. "Return" includes wouldn't allow return,

allowed it grudgingly, or replaced but still didn't work.

4. "Atmosphere" includes dirty, dark, dingy, crowded, poor layout, wrong kind of people shop there, etc.

5. "Personnel" includes rudeness, incompetence, aggressiveness, unfriendliness, untruthfulness, embarrassed me, or tried to sell me items I didn't need.

6. "Service" included slow and poor.

7. "Price/Payment" includes costs too much, no saving, no price tags, charged higher than agreed, check problems, etc.

8. "Self-caused" includes problems caused primarily by the consumer.

9. "Misc" includes environmental concerns, distance from store, store refused to do business, foreign manufacturer, and untruthful or stupid ads.

Of the 999 stories, 16 were not codeable into any one of the store categories used in this study, leaving 983 stories coded for store type. These 16 stories were too diverse to justifiably combine into a single miscellaneous category. Examples are parcel delivery, an entire shopping mall, and a major consumer products company.

RESULTS

Store Type By Complaint Type

Table 1 shows, for the eleven different store types, the frequency of each category of reason for avoiding that type of store. The first row, labeled "product," refers to stories where a specific product was mentioned independent of any store. This "product" category is included to show the difference between products and stores. Generally there were no surprises in this table. However, it is noteworthy that department stores and restaurants accounted for 48% of all store-type stories told. Adding in grocery stores and automotive accounts for 81% of all the avoidance stories.

Product Type By Complaint Type

Table 2 shows the reasons for avoiding each of the twenty-eight different product categories. Of

all stories, 29% were about packaged food and food prepared out of the home. This is much higher than any other category. The next highest categories were personal care (8.2%) and auto

Table 1
Store Type By Complaint Type

Store Type	Product Quality	Personnel	Service	Price/Payment	Atmosphere	Misc
Product	284	57	22	23	2	14
Department	59	67	22	23	23	8
Restaurant	107	31	41	10	7	8
Grocery	60	13	8	20	59	5
Automotive	41	48	10	14	1	5
Bank	5	16	13	1	0	6
Gas Station	8	10	4	2	1	4
Tape/CD	5	3	2	6	0	2
Sport	1	15	2	1	0	0
Convenience	5	9	0	3	2	0
Hardware	3	6	1	2	0	0
Furniture	0	5	2	1	0	0
Unknown	5	9	2	2	0	3
Total	583	289	129	108	95	55

Table 1 (cont.)

Store Type	Repeat Purchase	Repeat Pair	Self-Caus	N of Complaints	N of Stories	Complaints/Story
Product	17	15	4	438	355	1.23
Department	22	5	11	240	163	1.47
Restaurant	2	1	0	207	146	1.42
Grocery	0	0	0	165	109	1.51
Automotive	5	23	4	151	101	1.50
Bank	0	1	0	42	27	1.56
Gas Station	0	0	1	30	27	1.11
Tape/CD	0	0	0	18	14	1.29
Sport	2	1	0	22	13	1.69
Convenience	0	0	0	19	12	1.58
Hardware	1	0	0	13	10	1.30
Furniture	0	0	0	8	6	1.33
Unknown	1	0	0	22	16	1.38
Total	50	46	20	1375	999	1.38

repair (6.2%).

The majority of the stories had a moderate to strong grudgeholding aspect. In spite of the intentional neutrality of the questionnaire instructions, we were surprised that most of the stories involved some degree of grudgeholding.

Avoidance invites the recognition that, for each brand or store, in most market categories there are brand or store loyals, brand or store avoiders, and the rest of the market. Sellers prefer brand or store loyalty. They usually ignore brand

or store avoidance. Brand or store failure may be attributed to increasing levels of brand or store avoidance, of which the brand or store is largely unaware.

Niche marketing emphasizes serving narrow

Table 2
Product Type By Complaint Type

Product Type	Prod uct Qual ity	Per son nel	Ser vice	Price /Pay ment	At mos phere	Misc.
Appliance	12	8	0	2	0	0
Auto-access	7	8	2	2	0	1
Auto-gasoline	12	8	2	3	2	1
Auto-purchase	18	22	2	0	0	3
Auto-repair	19	25	13	13	1	2
Cloth-child	1	0	0	0	0	0
Cloth-men	10	16	2	4	1	0
Cloth-women	34	15	3	8	5	2
Computer	1	1	0	1	0	0
Dry cleaners	6	0	2	1	0	0
Electronics	12	13	4	10	0	2
Financial	7	17	13	1	0	6
Food-at home	3	0	0	0	0	0
Food-out	123	26	41	11	10	4
Food-packaged	132	3	2	10	17	4
Hardware	7	6	1	2	0	0
Home decor	4	9	4	1	0	0
House maintain	19	3	2	2	0	2
Jewelry	2	8	1	0	0	0
Kitchen	1	2	0	0	0	0
Magaz / News	5	0	0	0	0	1
Office equip	3	1	1	0	0	0
Personal care	76	8	1	0	0	4
Pharmacy	6	4	0	0	0	0
Photography	2	3	5	2	0	0
Shoes	29	14	1	6	1	2
Sports-equip.	5	12	1	1	0	0
Sports-partic.	0	2	0	0	1	0
Unknown	27	54	26	28	57	21
Total	583	287	129	108	95	55

sets of consumers. The more precise the seller's niche strategy, the greater the likelihood that those outside the niche clearly recognize that the product or store is not for them, resulting in them becoming avoiders of that brand or store. If the seller has incorrectly estimated consumer wants and/or the size of consumer pool the niche is intended to serve, the seller has a difficult if not impossible task in reversing or broadening the niche because the potential new customers were turned into avoiders by the initial narrowness in the niche strategy.

Because of the way in which the data were gathered we cannot tell how representative our sample really is. However, it is noteworthy that our respondents had on average of 6.48 stores they intentionally avoided. Perhaps the really successful stores are those who do not alienate

Table 2 (cont.)

Product Type	Re turn	Re pair	Self Caus ed	N of Com plaints	N of Stories	Com plaints / Story
Appliance	2	4	0	28	20	1.40
Auto-access	4	3	0	27	16	1.69
Auto-gasoline	0	0	2	30	24	1.25
Auto-purchase	0	3	2	50	40	1.25
Auto-repair	2	22	2	99	62	1.60
Cloth-child	0	0	1	2	2	1.00
Cloth-men	3	0	1	37	27	1.37
Cloth-women	4	0	2	73	52	1.40
Computer	0	0	0	3	3	1.00
Dry cleaners	1	1	0	11	8	1.38
Electronics	5	3	0	49	33	1.48
Financial	0	1	0	45	29	1.55
Food-at home	0	0	1	4	4	1.00
Food-out	2	1	0	218	154	1.42
Food-packaged	0	0	0	168	132	1.27
Hardware	4	0	0	20	14	1.43
Home decor	1	0	1	20	14	1.43
House maintain	1	0	0	29	25	1.16
Jewelry	2	2	1	17	12	1.42
Kitchen	1	0	0	4	3	1.33
Magaz / News	0	0	0	6	6	1.00
Office equip	0	1	0	6	3	2.00
Personal care	1	0	0	90	82	1.10
Pharmacy	1	0	0	12	10	1.20
Photography	0	0	0	12	6	2.00
Shoes	11	1	2	67	46	1.46
Sports-equip.	2	2	0	23	16	1.44
Sports-partic.	0	0	1	4	3	1.33
Unknown	3	2	4	221	153	1.44
Total	50	46	20	1375	999	1.38

customers, whose efforts are tuned as much to not creating avoiders as most marketers are tuned to creating brand or store loyal customers. Perhaps the stores in the process of failing are those who ignore the avoiders, seeking only to increase the number of brand or store loyal customers. All of marketing promotion is geared to bringing people into the store with the idea that they will like it when they get there and come back again.

Once a brand or store creates an avoider there is no means to undo the damage done, because the avoider, by definition, avoids the brand or store

and all communication about it. Once dissatisfaction leads to brand or store avoidance, it is very difficult for the seller to ever get that customer back. Once a consumer becomes an avoider, the only way that they can be enticed back to the store is through indirect means: ie. a conversation with a loyal customer. Advertising and special offers from a store one avoids are likely to fall on deaf ears.

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