

DISSATISFIERS AND SATISFIERS :
SUGGESTIONS FROM CONSUMER COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS*

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ABSTRACT

Consumer complaints and compliments have long been a source of feedback on market performance. Executives often use this customer feedback as an exception reporting mechanism to identify weaknesses to be corrected or strengths to be promoted. Although they are not likely to be representative of the customer's complete experience with a product or service, complaints and compliments do highlight those dimensions of a product or service about which customers really care. The fact that customers take the time to voice their dissatisfaction or satisfaction suggests the attributes are salient in the post-use evaluation process.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970's, an effort was undertaken to determine the frequency of complaints and compliments in the hospitality industry. Members of the National Restaurant Association and the American Hotel and Motel Association were surveyed relative to the frequency and type of complaints and compliments they received from their customers. They were also polled regarding their use of various methods for performance evaluation. In most respects, the survey was straight forward, and the findings were not surprising. However, there was a curious pattern to the complaints and compliments that drew our attention. This pattern was found in both industry surveys.

The data suggest that some attributes could be salient in their potential to cause dissatisfaction while other attributes could be salient in their potential to cause high levels of satisfaction. Some aspects of restaurant and hotel/motel service appear to lead to dissatisfaction but not to high satisfaction. Complaining behavior ensues if the performance standard is not met. Yet, high performance does not necessarily lead to a level of satisfaction which motivates action to compliment. Similarly, some aspects of the service can lead to high satisfaction and complimenting behavior, while the absence of that service or low performance does not necessarily lead to complaining behavior. The conclusion drawn from these observations is that the triggering mechanism for complaining and complimenting may be bounded in one direction or the other for certain attributes.

The purpose of this paper is to review the findings of the restaurant and lodging surveys. In so doing, we will raise the issue about whether attributes are inherently satisfiers or dissatisfiers.

RESTAURANT SURVEY

In 1978, the National Restaurant Association participated in a survey of food service executives which focused on the measurement of guest satisfaction. Survey questionnaires were sent to approximately 6,000 NRA members. Responses were received from 432 firms representing 22,000 food service units. The stated purposes of the survey were:

- 1) to determine the relative importance of various measures of guest satisfaction used in the food service industry and

- 2) to gather data on the relative frequency of some 26 categories of complaints and compliments.

Nearly all of the survey responses came from management. Over 97% of the responses were completed by general managers, vice presidents, presidents or owner/operators. Most of the participants in the survey were reporting for a single unit; i.e., 78% of the responses represented the guest satisfaction experience of an individual restaurant. Over 30% of the respondents operated a unit which was affiliated with either a corporation or franchise chain.

The data included in the survey represented practices of chains as well as individual properties. Importantly, 22% of the responses reflected the views of the corporate office of a chain or franchise organization.

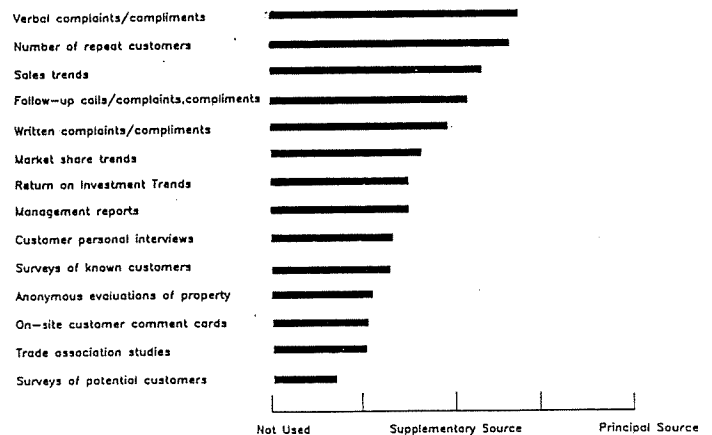
The respondents represented several types of restaurants. However, most operated with either a limited menu refreshment or fast food (44%). The remaining were mostly full menu restaurants (39%). Although the respondents had average dinner checks for an individual customer of \$4.90, 19% reported an average check under \$3.00 while 3% reported an average of \$15.00 or more.

In summary, although the respondents covered a good cross section of the food service industry, statistically they do not constitute a representative sample of all commercial restaurants.

Methods of Measuring Guest Satisfaction

The food service executives were asked to indicate the relative importance to their firm of each of fourteen approaches to the measurement of guest satisfaction (see Figure 1). Respondents indicated that the more important methods for measuring guest satisfaction involved direct communication with the guest including verbal complaints/compliments, follow up calls of complaints/compliments, and written complaints/compliments. Of almost equal importance were several types of trend

FIGURE 1
MEASURES OF GUEST SATISFACTION -- RESTAURANTS



information including the number of repeat customers, sales trends, market share trends, and return on investment trends. Communication efforts initiated by management such as surveys, interviews, anonymous inspections and comment cards were considered less useful.

The Most Frequent Complaints and Compliments

Respondents were asked to rate 26 service categories on a scale from 1 (seldom) to 5 (often) in terms of how frequently they received complaints and compliments. The ratings were undertaken separately for complaints and compliments. The 10 most frequent complaints and the 10 most frequent compliments are listed in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. Although the complaints and compliments reported in the survey are not necessarily representative of the entire food service industry, the findings of the survey do lead to some interesting observations.

TABLE 1
THE MOST FREQUENT COMPLAINTS -- RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

	AVERAGE RATING	RANK ORDER OF FREQUENCY
Availability of parking	1.89	1
Traffic congestion in establishment	1.88	2
Quality of service	1.85	3
Price of drinks, meals and other services	1.63	4
Noise level	1.60	5
Helpful attitude of employees	1.59	6
Food quality/method of preparation	1.53	7
Spaciousness of establishment	1.50	8
Hours of operation	1.48	9
Quality of service	1.46	10

TABLE 2
THE MOST FREQUENT COMPLIMENTS -- RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

	AVERAGE RATING	RANK ORDER OF FREQUENCY
Quality of service	3.80	1
Food quality/method of preparation	3.72	2
Helpful attitude of employees	3.66	3
Cleanliness of establishment	3.37	4
Neatness of establishment	3.35	5
Size of portions	3.35	5
Employee appearance	3.16	7
Quantity of service	3.10	8
Responsiveness of complaints	2.94	9
Price of drinks, meals, and other services	2.91	10

The most frequent complaint category reported by restaurant operators was the availability of parking. The traffic congestion in the establishment (lobby, parking, dining) and the quality of service provided by food service units also rated high as major complaints. Next in frequency were complaints about the price of drinks, meals and other services, noise level in the establishment, helpfulness of employees, and food quality/method of preparation. Occurring less frequently but still in the top 10 were complaints about the spaciousness of the establishment, hours of operation, and the quantity of service.

The items receiving frequent compliments differed from the items receiving frequent complaints. With surprising consistency, most respondents reported receiving frequent compliments regarding the quality of service. They also reported many compliments regarding the food quality and its method of preparation, the helpful attitude of employees, the cleanliness and neatness of the establishment, and the size of the portions. Occurring less frequently, but still high on the list were compliments regarding the appearance of employees, quantity of service, the responsiveness to complaints, and the price of drinks, meals, and other services.

Relative Frequency of Complaints and Compliments

An interesting finding of the study relates to the perceived frequency of compliments relative to complaints. The executives reported receiving more compliments than complaints. Observe that each of the 10 most frequent compliments were received more often than the number one complaint (compare Tables 1 and 2). In addition, when asked how many complaint and compliment letters they received during the last 12 months, the responding executives reported 2 complimentary letters for every complaint letter. Finally, when asked what percentage of all comments made by their guests were favorable and what percentage unfavorable, they consistently indicated that over 76% were favorable and only 9% were unfavorable (the remaining 15% were either mixed, neutral, or indifferent).

It is not surprising that the executives reported more compliments than complaints. If the opposite were true, the restaurants would not be in business for very long. In addition, the executives are probably more receptive to compliments than complaints resulting in a certain amount of selective perception.

Patterns Among the Complaints and Compliments

Although guests are more likely to compliment than to complain, there are some interesting observations regarding the relative frequency of different complaints and compliments. Let us assume the average frequency ratings in Tables 1 and 2 are simply indicators of the relative frequency of the complaints and compliments. The items with comparatively high ratings are probably the service areas which receive the most complaints and/or compliments. The items with comparatively low ratings are probably service areas which receive few comments. Let us now consider the rank order of the frequency of complaints and compliments among the set of 26 attributes. See Tables 1 and 2 for the rank order of the most frequent complaints and compliments.

In this light, there are some restaurant attributes about which a guest is more likely to complain than to compliment a food service establishment. Availability of parking, traffic congestion in the establishment, the noise level in the establishment, the spaciousness of the establishment, and the hours of operation all appear in the top 10 complaint list. Yet few operators reported compliments concerning these attributes. It would appear that customer satisfaction in these areas will not enhance the guest's perception of hospitality but may detract from it when the guest's performance requirements are not met.

	Complaint Ranking	Compliment Ranking
Availability of parking	1	19
Traffic congestion in establishment	2	26
Noise level	5	24
Spaciousness of establishment	8	18
Hours of operation	9	20

In contrast, guests express appreciation for high performance in some areas where they do not complain. The findings suggest they respond favorably to a clean and neatly kept restaurant, ample size portions, neat employee appearance, and responsiveness to complaints. Guests seem willing to go out of their way to let management know they are pleased and that their performance requirements have been surpassed concerning these attributes.

	Compliment Ranking	Complaint Ranking
Cleanliness of establishment	4	14
Neatness of establishment	5	11
Size of portions	5	12
Employee appearance	7	17
Responsiveness to complaints	9	20

The quality and quantity of service, food quality, helpfulness of employees, and the prices of drinks, meals, and other services appear in both the most frequent complaint and compliment lists indicating that customers are more inclined to voice their opinions about these attributes. In addition, restaurant operators may have difficulty maintaining consistent levels of performance in these areas, achieving unusually good and poor performance in the same restaurant.

	Compliment Ranking	Complaint Ranking
Quality of service	1	3
Food quality	2	7
Helpful attitude of employees	3	6
Quantity of service	8	10
Prices of drinks, meals and other services	10	4

Finally, there are several areas which receive neither complaints nor compliments of any relative significance. The relatively low incidence of these attributes suggest that they are either not salient or are easily satisfied.

	Compliment Ranking	Complaint Ranking
Management's knowledge of service	11	23
Availability of food on menu	12	16
Beverage quality (alcoholic including wine)	13	24
Variety of service	14	21
Uniformity of appearance of establishment	15	26
Quality of advertising	16	25
Convenience of location	17	15
Quietness of surroundings	21	18
Accuracy of bill	22	19
Litter outside restaurant	23	22
Reservation system	25	13

LODGING SURVEY

In 1978, the American Hotel and Motel Association also participated in a survey of lodging executives relative to the monitoring of guest satisfaction. The stated purpose of the study was again to determine the relative importance of various means used to measure guest satisfaction and to gather data on relative frequency of some 25 categories of complaint and compliments.

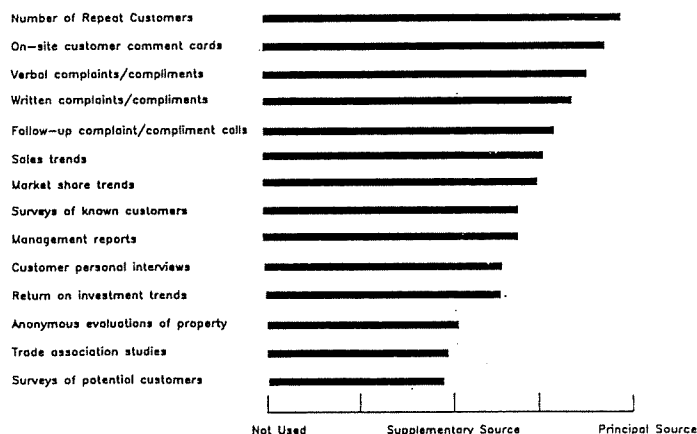
Survey questionnaires were sent to approximately 2000 AH&MA members. Responses were received from 260

lodging executives representing 280,000 rooms. Again, most responses came from top management, including general managers, regional managers, vice presidents, presidents and owners. The experience of an individual property was represented with 88% of the responses, and 12% of the responses reflected corporate chain and franchise views. Properties responding were of all sizes, had occupancies and average room rates which corresponded roughly to industry averages providing a fair cross section of the innkeeping field; but, because of the small response sample, the respondents were not statistically representative of the entire lodging industry. The data, however, do provide insight into sensitive areas of consumer evaluation.

Methods of Measuring Guest Satisfaction

Survey participants were again requested to rate the importance of 14 means of measuring guest response (see Figure 2). The most frequently cited indicator of guest satisfaction was the number of repeat customers. Respondents also indicated that the more important measures of guest satisfaction involved direct communication with the guest such as the use of comment cards, verbal and written complaints/compliments, and follow-up calls. Various types of trend data were next in importance but less so than with the restaurant executives. Less useful were communication efforts initiated by management -- surveys, interviews and anonymous inspections.

FIGURE 2
MEASURES OF GUEST SATISFACTION -- LODGING INDUSTRY



The Most Frequent Complaints and Compliments

The lodging executives rated a comparable set of 26 service categories in terms of how often they received both complaints and compliments. The 10 most frequent complaints and the 10 most frequent compliments are listed in Tables 3 and 4 respectively. While it cannot be concluded that these complaints and compliments are representative of the entire innkeeping industry, they are instructive regarding how a large number of lodging executives view customer feedback.

The three most frequent areas of complaint were price of guest room, meals and other services, speed of service, and the quality of the service. Following those were complaints about parking availability, employee knowledge and service, quietness of surroundings, and availability of accommodations. Lower on the list, but still in the top 10 were complaints about check-out time, cleanliness of the property, and adequacy of credit.

TABLE 3
THE MOST FREQUENT COMPLAINTS -- LODGING INDUSTRY

	AVERAGE RATING	RANK ORDER OF FREQUENCY
Price of rooms, meals and other services	2.12	1
Speed of Service	2.11	2
Quality of service	1.90	3
Availability of parking	1.79	4
Employee knowledge and service	1.75	5
Quietness of surroundings	1.73	6
Availability of accommodations requested	1.73	7
Checkout time	1.71	8
Cleanliness of establishment	1.69	9
Adequacy of credit	1.60	10

TABLE 4
THE MOST FREQUENT COMPLIMENTS -- LODGING INDUSTRY

	AVERAGE RATING	RANK ORDER OF FREQUENCY
Helpful attitude of employees	4.12	1
Cleanliness of establishment	4.04	2
Neatness of establishment	3.94	3
Quality of service	3.89	4
Employee knowledge and service	3.41	5
Convenience of location	3.05	6
Management's knowledge of service	3.03	7
Quantity of service	3.01	8
Spaciousness of establishment	2.98	9
Quietness of surroundings	2.95	10

Response areas of compliments and complaints differed in several respects. The executives reported receiving the most frequent compliments regarding the helpful attitude of employees. Ranking closely with this was the cleanliness of the property, neatness of property, and the quality of service provided to guests. Still high on the list but occurring less frequently were compliments on employee knowledge and service, a property's convenient location, management's knowledge of service, the quantity of guest service, spaciousness of the property and quietness of surroundings.

Relative Frequency of Complaints and Compliments

In a fashion similar to the restaurant industry, responding executives reported receiving 2 complimentary letters for every complaint letter. When asked what portion of all guest comments were favorable and unfavorable, the executives consistently held that more than 70% were favorable and only 12% unfavorable. Other comments were either mixed, neutral or indifferent. In a consistent manner, the ratings regarding the individual service attributes clearly indicated a preponderance of compliments relative to complaints (compare Tables 3 and 4).

Patterns Among the Complaints and Compliments

Let us again consider the rank order of the frequency of complaints and compliments among the set of 25 attributes (see Tables 3 and 4). Once more, there are some service areas about which a guest is more likely to complain than to compliment. These include price of rooms, speed of service, availability of parking, availability of accommodations, check-out time and adequacy of credit. Although these all appear in the top 10 list

of complaints, relatively fewer compliments were reported in these same areas. So, it would seem that high performance in these areas will not enhance the hotel's or motel's image in the guest's eyes; but if the guest's minimum performance requirements in these areas are not met, they may seriously detract from the evaluation of service.

	Complaint Ranking	Compliment Ranking
Price of rooms, meals, etc.	1	15
Speed of service	2	11
Availability of parking	4	17
Availability of accommodations	7	18
Check-out time	8	23
Adequacy of credit	10	21
Accuracy of bill	11	25

Alternately, guests seem to appreciate high performance in some areas and are more apt to give compliments about such things as the helpful attitude of employees, neatness of property, convenience of location, management's knowledge of service, quantity of service, and spaciousness of the hotel or motel property.

	Compliment Ranking	Complaint Ranking
Helpful Attitude of employees	1	12
Neatness of establishment	3	15
Convenience of location	6	23
Management's knowledge of service	7	21
Quantity of service	8	13
Spaciousness of establishment	9	20

Further into the survey results, it appears innkeepers might have difficulty maintaining high levels of performance in such service areas as cleanliness of the property, quality of service, employee knowledge and service, quietness of surroundings, and speed of service. These performance areas appear in both the most frequent complaint and compliment lists and suggest that service is not consistent.

	Compliment Ranking	Complaint Ranking
Cleanliness of establishment	2	9
Quality of service	4	3
Employee knowledge and service	5	5
Quietness of surroundings	10	6

Finally, there are several areas which receive neither complaints nor compliments of any relative significance. The relatively low incidence of these attributes again suggest that they are either not salient or easily satisfied.

	Compliment Ranking	Complaint Ranking
Responsiveness to complaints	12	16
Variety of service	13	17
Uniformity of appearance of establishment	14	25
Employee appearance	16	22
Hours of operation	19	19
Quality of advertising	20	24
Overbooking	22	18
Traffic congestion in establishment	24	14

DISCUSSION

The reports of consumer complaints and compliments by the restaurant and lodging executives raise some interesting issues regarding the nature of satisfaction variables. The data suggest that some attributes have the capacity to cause dissatisfaction while other attributes have the capacity to cause high levels of satisfaction. Still others have the capability to cause both dissatisfaction and high satisfaction, and some seem to elicit no response whatsoever. These findings suggest the following typology of attributes:

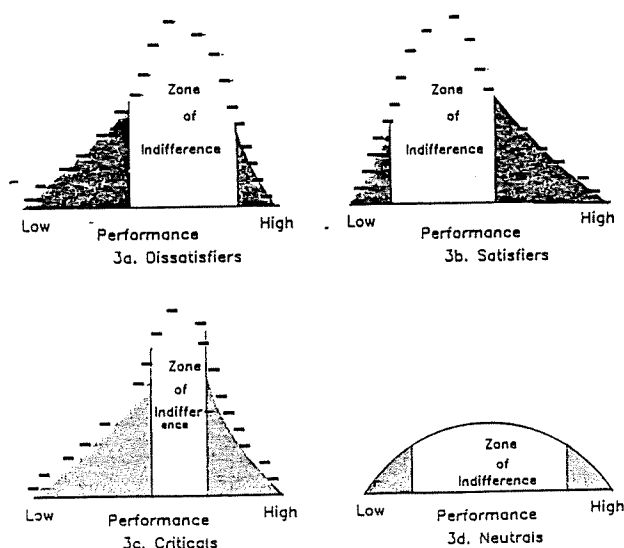
	Potential for	
	Compliments	Complaints
- Dissatisfiers:	Low	High
- Satisfiers:	High	Low
- Criticals:	High	High
- Neutrals:	Low	Low

Dissatisfiers

Dissatisfiers appear to be those variables where low performance or the absence of a desired feature can cause negative feelings/dissatisfaction leading to complaining behavior. Yet, higher levels of service or the presence of a feature do not seem to cause positive feelings/high satisfaction leading to complimenting behavior. The availability of parking at a restaurant is a good example of a dissatisfier. If one is always able to find a parking place, then the issue is not likely to cross one's mind. However, if one cannot find any parking places or has to walk two blocks, then one quickly becomes motivated to complain about it. Similarly, one is not likely to care if a hotel accepts 2 or 20 credit cards as long as it accepts one's credit card. The availability of credit is a non-stimulating issue until a customer is left with no way to pay the bill.

In theoretical terms, dissatisfiers are likely to have a performance distribution skewed towards the lower end (see Figure 3a). In addition, the typical level of performance is probably well defined and accepted as industry practice. Finally, the zone of indifference (Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins; 1984) is likely to be very broad and encompass the upper end of the distribution.

FIGURE 3
PERFORMANCE DISTRIBUTION BY VARIABLE TYPE



From a management point of view, dissatisfiers represent the necessary but not sufficient conditions of service or product performance. Minimum performance must be maintained, but efforts to achieve high performance may not be warranted.

Satisfiers

Satisfiers appear to be those variables where unusual performance elicits strong positive feelings/satisfaction leading to complimenting behavior, but typical performance or the absence of a feature will not necessarily cause negative feelings or dissatisfaction leading to complaining behavior. The spaciousness of the Hyatt Regency lobbies is a good example of a satisfier. Most hotel/motel lobbies do not merit much comment. They are generally of modest size and are decorated in earth tones with comfortable furniture. In contrast, many of the Hyatt Regency lobbies are very large open spaces with trees, hanging plants, and inside elevators. The absence of these large open lobbies will generally not cause dissatisfaction. However, when they are first encountered, they do represent a pleasant surprise.

Large portions in a restaurant also fall into this category. Most restaurants have standardized around certain size portions for the entrees and side dishes. Chefs have also learned to garnish with parsley, lettuce, or tomatoes to leave an impression of a full plate. Normal portions do not generate much discussion. In contrast, when one is presented with a truly full or overflowing plate, there is often an exclamation of surprise.

From a theoretical viewpoint, satisfiers are probably skewed towards the upper end of the performance curve (see Figure 3b). In addition, the majority of offerings are probably distributed in a narrow band around an industry norm or standard. Customers have probably become accustomed to this standard, and it now falls within their zone of indifference.

From a management viewpoint, satisfiers represent an opportunity to move ahead of the pack. Customers appear to be receptive to higher levels of performance by virtue of their willingness to go out of their way to compliment the establishment. Efforts to improve performance in these areas may yield favorable returns.

Criticals

Criticals represent variables which are capable of eliciting both positive and negative feelings. The quality of service ranks high in both industries as eliciting complaints and compliments. As an intangible attribute, it is probably difficult to control. It is also highly dependent upon the personnel of the establishment and probably reflects the natural variability of humans.

In the restaurant category, the criticals are at the heart of the "food service" business and include helpful attitude of employees, food quality, and quantity of service in addition to quality of service. In the lodging business, the hotel/motel (especially the guest's room) is one's home away from home. The criticals are also at the heart of the business and include cleanliness, quality of service, employee knowledge and service (the people who see to your comfort) and the quietness of surroundings.

From a theoretical viewpoint, we suspect there is greater variation in the distribution of performance for the critical variables (see Figure 3c). The customer may also be more sensitive to what is acceptable performance since these variables appear to be at the heart of the "product" purchased. The zone of indifference may

be narrower for the same reason.

From a management viewpoint, the criticals represent both threats and opportunities. At the very least, management must learn to control the delivery mechanism and provide the minimal acceptable performance. Hotel rooms must be quiet, and restaurant food must not taste bad. Once minimum standards are met, then management can shift its resources to providing higher levels of performance on a consistent basis.

Neutrals

There are several areas which receive neither complaints nor compliments of any relative significance. The relatively low incidence of complaining and complimenting behavior suggests that these attributes are either not salient or are easily satisfied. Some of the variables may have previously fallen in the category of dissatisfiers.

Variables in Transition

The classification of satisfaction variables must be a dynamic process (see Figure 4). It can be readily seen that some satisfier type variables were probably critical variables at one time. Higher industry standards and/or increased management control may have reduced the downside performance variance of these variables. Similarly, some neutral variables may have been dissatisfiers formerly, but the incidence of low performance has either been reduced or the necessary service element has been adopted industry wide. We even suppose it may be possible to shift some of the neutral variables into the satisfier category. Burger King's "Have it your way" campaign effectively caused some consumers to place more importance on being able to make the hamburger to order rather than accept it as is.

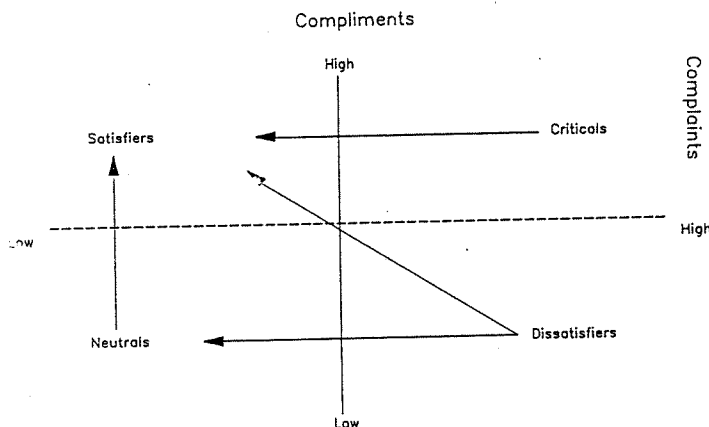
final set of variables (neutrals) seem to have little effect on the upper and lower ends of the satisfaction continuum.

The restaurant and hotel studies were not designed to explore the nature of satisfaction variables. Hospitality executives were simply asked to evaluate the frequency of complaints and compliments among a set of variables which trade association leaders thought were important in satisfying customers. Curiously, the pattern of responses suggested an underlying framework of these variables. It is not known whether this pattern exists beyond the hospitality industry. This preliminary analysis suggests that the pattern may have important theoretical and managerial implications and is recommended for further study.

REFERENCES

- Woodruff, Robert B., Ernest R. Cadotte, and Roger L. Jenkins (1983), "Modeling Consumer Satisfaction Processes Using Experience--Based Norms," *Journal of Marketing Research*, (August), Vol. 20, 296-304.

FIGURE 4
CLASSIFICATION OF ATTRIBUTES/STRATEGIES TO ADOPT



CONCLUSION

Consumer complaints and compliments have always been important to management. When viewed industry wide, they take on new meaning. Unexpectedly, the reported frequency of complaints and compliments across a large number of service areas suggest that certain performance categories have an uneven effect on consumer satisfaction. Some variables (labeled dissatisfiers) can cause dissatisfaction but not high levels of satisfaction. Other variables (satisfiers) can cause high satisfaction but do not seem to generate as much dissatisfaction. A third group of variables (criticals) swing both ways and can cause dissatisfaction and high satisfaction. The