

## INTRACHANNEL COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR AND CONFLICT

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### ABSTRACT

Most research on satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior has focused on consumers and their relationships with retailers/manufacturers while ignoring the intra- and interorganizational dynamics among members in a marketing channel. The general purpose of this paper is to present an extended conceptualization of channel complaint behavior as it is related to intrachannel conflict.

### INTRODUCTION

Intrachannel relationships provide a meaningful context and a valuable opportunity to examine complaining behavior among organizations due to the interdependence and formalized nature of channel relationships. Stern and Reve (1980) in their political economy framework of distribution channels emphasized the need for more rigorous study of channel member sentiments and behaviors which characterize the interactions between channel members. Complaining among channel members can, in part, be viewed as an overt manifestation of dissatisfaction with various aspects of the channel relationship. The presence of dissatisfaction in the channel relationship has implications for the internal efficiency of the operations of the channel (cf. Hunt and Nevin 1974).

The construct of satisfaction has been recognized to be of fundamental importance in understanding channel relationships (Robicheaux and El-Ansary 1975) and has received some theoretical and empirical attention (Ruekert and Churchill 1984; Frazier 1983; Stern and Reve 1980; Dwyer 1980; Mitchie and Roering 1978; Lusch 1976a; Hunt and Nevin 1974). However, very little research attention has been directed at studying complaining behavior within and among organizations despite more than a decade of theoretical and empirical work on consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and complaining behavior (cf. Day and Hunt 1979; Hunt and Day 1985). Complaining within channels is a pervasive phenomenon that has been "taken for granted" when it should be exploited as a valuable source of communication of channel member sentiments (e.g., dissatisfaction).

This paper has three objectives. The first objective is to briefly review the literature on consumer complaining behavior and intrachannel conflict in order to provide a broad overview of what is currently known about these constructs. The second objective is to define and develop an extended conceptualization of the types of complaining that exist in marketing channels. The last objective is to explore the relationship between intrachannel complaining and conflict as mediated by the perceived responsiveness to complaints.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

#### Complaint Behavior

Consumer complaining behavior has been generally defined as "an expression of dissatisfaction on a consumer's behalf to a responsible party" (Landon 1980, p.337). Resnik and Harmon (1983, p. 86) state that a complaint is an "overt manifestation of dissatisfaction." Singh and Howell (1985, p.42) define consumer complaining behavior (more formally) to include "all non-behavioral and behavioral responses which involve communicating something negative regarding a purchase episode and is triggered by perceived dissatisfaction(s) with that episode." This suggests that there is yet to be complete agreement about the conceptual domain of consumer complaining behavior.

Furthermore, compared to consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, the causes and consequences of complaining behavior have not been as well conceptualized (Landon 1980; Robinson 1979; Landon 1977). In their "life-cycle" analysis of the development of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (CS/D) research, Woodruff, Cadotte and Jenkins (1983) note that CS/D has reached the maturity stage where the focus of inquiry has shifted from basic descriptive research and concept development in the introductory stage to research on measurement reliability/validity and testing conceptual relationships and entire models.

Although consumer complaining behavior has received some amount of conceptualization and empirical verification, "the many different and sometimes contrasting theoretical frameworks for explaining the CCB process appears to give an impression of a relatively fragmented structure of research in the area" (Singh and Howell 1985, p. 45). They, among others (cf. Richins 1979; Folkes 1984; Day 1984), have noted the need for a comprehensive framework that integrates the different streams of research and facilitates systematic investigation of gaps in the theory.

A few attempts have been made at developing models and frameworks to integrate the fragmented research and provide an underlying theoretical base for analyzing and understanding consumer complaint behavior. Gronhaug (1977) has presented a framework which incorporates satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaint behavior as part of the buying process. Day and Landon (1977) have outlined the steps toward the development of such a theory by identifying the marketing, consumer, and circumstantial factors which influence consumers' complaint behavior choices.

Landon (1977) has proposed a phenomenological model of consumer complaint behavior. According to this model, complaint behavior "is a function of consumer dissatisfaction, the importance associated with that level of dissatisfaction, the expected benefit from complaining and the personality of the individual" (p. 31). Richins (1979) has presented a

process model of consumer complaining behavior which includes "three major cognitive processes: evaluation of the satisfaction/dissatisfaction, attributional evaluation, and an evaluation of recourse alternatives. These three processes are influenced by the consumer's pre-existing attitudes and beliefs and by exogenous variables. The outputs of the processes are changes in attitudes and beliefs, changes in emotional states, intentions, and behaviors" (p. 30).

There are two competing conceptualizations as to how dissatisfaction is translated into consumer complaining behavior (cf. Singh and Howell 1985). One approach posits a directly proportional relationship between feelings of dissatisfaction and CCB (Bearden and Teel 1983). That is, consumers who are dissatisfied are more likely to complain than those who are not dissatisfied. However, dissatisfaction is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for complaining behavior to occur. Day 1984 emphasizes the role of mediating variables (situational and personal) that may either motivate or discourage consumers from complaining and which appear to be unrelated to the intensity of dissatisfaction. In this approach, complaining behavior is seen as a decision making process which does not entirely depend on the extent of dissatisfaction but rather on consumers' perception of the attribution of dissatisfaction, perceived costs of complaining, importance of the purchase decision, etc. In Landon's (1977) model for example, importance of the discrepancy between expectation and performance and, therefore, dissatisfaction will vary with the cost of the product, search time, physical harm and ego involvement. The perceived benefit of the complaining is a function of the expected payoff from complaining, the cost of complaining; the decision to complain is mediated by the consumer's personality.

#### Intrachannel Conflict

Although the phenomenon of conflict has received a good deal of attention in the organizational behavior and channels literature, there is little consensus among researchers on the specific definition and dimensions of conflict. (Pondy 1967; Thomas 1976; Brown and Day 1981). For example, Pondy (1967) notes that conflict has been used to describe antecedent conditions (e.g., scarcity of resources) of conflictful behavior; affective states (e.g., stress, tension, hostility, etc.) of the individuals involved; cognitive states of individuals (i.e., their perception or awareness of conflictful situations) and conflictful behavior (ranging from passive resistance to overt aggression). To integrate these diverse views of conflict, Pondy suggests viewing it as a dynamic process, and analyzing it as a sequence of "conflict episodes". He identifies five stages of a conflict episode: latent conflict, perceived conflict, felt conflict, manifest conflict, and conflict aftermath.

Thomas (1976) has proposed a complementary structural model which instead of looking at specific conflict episodes in detail, is concerned with "... the aggregate mix of behaviors used by the two parties during negotiations--the prevalence of collaboration, competition, avoidance, etc." Conflict behavior in this model is seen to be shaped by four types of structural variables: behavioral dispositions (stemming from motives and abilities); social pressures; incentive structure; and rules and procedures. Therefore, each party's behavior is viewed as "the resultant of those pressures and constraints, and behavioral change is seen as the consequence of changes in the configuration of these variables" (p. 912).

Marketing researchers need to exercise discretion when borrowing or adapting frameworks developed in other contexts. White (1974) contends that while the process approach to conflict was developed in the context of intraorganizational relationships, it is also applicable to interorganizational relationships. Based on their adaptation of Pondy's process model of conflict, Rosenberg and Stern (1970) and Stern and Gorman (1969) developed a process model of intrachannel conflict which suggests that conflict involves three stages: the emergence of causes of conflict (structural and attitudinal factors), behavioral reactions (conflict resolution strategies) of the channel members, and outcomes of the conflict (behavioral and financial).

Extending the analysis, Rosenberg (1971), Firat, Tybout and Stern (1974), Etgar (1979), and Brown and Day (1981) suggest that channel members experiencing intrachannel conflict move from a cognitive/affective stage of conflict to a behavioral/manifest stage. The former stage is characterized by feelings of intrachannel stress, frustration and animosity which if not resolved gets manifested in behaviors ranging from mild disagreements or lack of cooperation to severing the channel relationship. Most of the studies investigating conflict in channels of distribution have adopted a process approach (Schul, Pride and Little 1983; Brown and Day 1981; Cadotte and Stern 1979; Rosenberg 1974, 1971; Rosenberg and Stern 1970; Stern and Gorman 1969).

Intrachannel conflict is said to exist when "a component (channel member) perceives the behavior of another to be impeding the attainment of its goals or the effective performance of its instrumental behavior patterns" (Stern and Gorman 1969, p. 156). This is a fairly broad definition and provides little guidance as to how one can actually go about measuring conflict in channels. Furthermore, Brown and Day (1981) note that the lack of concentration on a particular stage of the conflict process or on a particular dimension of a conflict stage has led to the wide variety of operationalizations of channel conflict.

Because any kind of physical violence is usually strongly proscribed by organizational norms (Pondy 1967) and/or legal sanctions, manifest conflict in channels of distribution usually takes the form of verbal or written exchanges of disagreements (Lusch 1976b) as well as blocking behaviors (Stern, Sternthal and Craig 1973) between channel members. When manifest conflict is defined in terms of disagreements, then the amount of manifest conflict within a channel will be a function of the frequency and intensity of disagreements between channel members and the importance of the issues on which they disagree (Brown and Day 1981). Blocking behaviors include noncooperative behaviors such as withholding warranty claims, delaying the allocation of the product, removing allowance and other forms of price discounts, etc.

The review thus far seems to imply that conflict is usually destructive or dysfunctional. However, Thomas (1976, p. 889) notes that,

Like any potent force, conflict generates ambivalence by virtue of its ability to do great injury or, if harnessed, great good. Until recently, social scientists have been most aware of conflict's destructive capability - epitomized by strikes, wars, interracial hostility, and so on. This awareness seems to have given conflict an overwhelming connotation of danger and to have created

a bias toward harmony and peacemaking in the social sciences. However, a balanced view of conflict seems to be emerging. More and more, social scientists are coming to realize--and to demonstrate--that conflict itself is no evil, but rather a phenomenon which can have constructive or destructive effects depending upon its management.

Similarly, in the context of distribution channels, Frazier (1973, p. 73) points out that even when the level of intrachannel conflict has reached the manifest stage, "its consequences can be functional overall if it is resolved in such a way as to enhance perceptions of goal compatibility, improve role clarity, and lessen role ambiguity and role disagreement". However, when manifest conflict is not effectively managed, nonfunctional consequences ranging from negative perceptions to disruption of personal relationships may result (cf. Stern, Sternthal, and Craig 1973).

Pondy (1969) further distinguishes between frictional conflict within a stable organization structure and strategic conflict aimed at changing the organization structure. In other words, for frictional conflicts, "the pattern of authority relations and the allocation of resources and of functional responsibilities do not change as a result of such conflicts" (p.499). Strategic conflicts (cf. Assael 1969; Lammers 1969), on the other hand, are not the unintended result of poor or ineffective intrachannel coordination but reflect deliberate attempts by generally weaker members to force more powerful members to relinquish some power and control over resources.

Stern (1971) among others have emphasized the need for channel members to restrict intrachannel conflict to functional levels. However, the perceived nature of conflict (functional or dysfunctional) will vary depending on which channel member's perspective is taken and the type of channel issue. For example, attempts by the weaker channel member to gain more power, say in certain decision making issues, may be perceived as functional from the weaker member's perspective but not from the stronger member's. One way to resolve this apparent discrepancy would be to look at the broader goals of the channel arrangement and analyze any conflict in terms of whether it helps facilitate or inhibit the attainment of these goals.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Channel Complaints: An Extended Conceptualization

Channel complaining behavior is similar in some respects to consumer complaint behavior in that some complaints are motivated by dissatisfaction and may be mediated by factors such as importance of the channel issue, perceived benefits of complaining and personal characteristics of channel members. This similarity, however, ends when we consider the complexities of channel complaint behavior due to (1) the ongoing and formalized nature of channel relationships; (2) the type of channel and level of intrasystem integration; and (3) the two-way nature of the flow of complaints. The multiple-issue nature of the channel relationship and the different levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with these issues make a straight forward analysis of the relationship between the degree of overall satisfaction and the intensity of channel complaints much more difficult compared to consumer complaints. Therefore, adopting a contingency

approach in analyzing intrachannel complaining behavior becomes even more critical.

Channel complaints are defined as all behavioral responses that involve communicating something negative regarding certain aspects (channel issues) of the channel relationship. This is a modification of the consumer complaint definition proposed by Singh and Howell (1985) and is different for the following reasons.

First, a channel complaint can arise from a broad range of issues and is not restricted to a "purchase episode". There are at least four categories or aspects of the channel relationships that can give rise to complaints: role elements, autonomous decision issues, policy issues, and personnel issues. Furthermore, the predominance of certain channel issues that provide the basis for complaints may vary depending on the stage or process of the exchange relationship: initiation, implementation, or review (Frazier 1983). The outcomes of the initiation process include channel roles and responsibilities, relative power and aspirations of channel members. Achieved rewards or losses (intrinsic and extrinsic) represent the outcome of the implementation process and satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the overall exchange relationship represents the outcome of the review process. The level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction is a function of the discrepancy between expected and actual channel member rewards (Howard and Sheth 1969).

Second, a channel complaint involves an overt (behavioral) act of communication. Complaints can take the form of either verbal or written communications among channel members. This definition is therefore restrictive in that it does not incorporate negative feelings or dissatisfaction over channel issues that remain in the cognitive or affective state and which are not communicated.

Most importantly, a channel complaint is very often triggered by reasons other than feelings of dissatisfaction with a channel issue. Intrachannel rivalry, politics and personality differences are some of the other reasons that may give rise to complaints. This suggests that in the context of channels there are two main types of complaining--functional and nonfunctional. Both types of complaints need to be analyzed because they provide feedback on different aspects of the channel relationship.

Functional complaints are borne out of perceived dissatisfaction with one or more channel issues. In this regard functional complaints tend to be issue specific and reflect a genuine concern for improving or maintaining the channel relationship. Nonfunctional complaining, on the other hand, arises because of general goal incongruity. It is therefore broader and encompasses motivations such as "game playing", politicking, and personality differences. Nonfunctional complaining in channels is not uncommon and reflects attempts by certain channel members to gain concessions and/or consolidate their relative power positions within the channel.

### Complaining As A Form Of Manifest Conflict

Since complaining is defined as all behavioral responses that involve communicating something negative regarding certain aspects (channel issues) of the channel relationship, the appropriate domain for its consideration within the process framework suggested by Pondy (1967) is in the manifest conflict stage. The main argument for this contention is that complaining, whether verbal or written, involves a behavioral act. A channel member goes a step beyond

the formation and expression of attitudes or feelings over the channel relationship (affective conflict) by engaging in an activity (i.e., complaining). Although this is a fine line of distinction, it is "consistent" with the way manifest conflict has been defined in the literature to include all overt behaviors (activities) that take place when one channel member is seen as frustrating other channel members' attempts to reach their goals. These behaviors take many forms, ranging from mild disagreements to violent actions (Pondy 1967; Thomas 1976).

### Integration

The preceding discussion emphasized the need for broadening the concept of channel complaints in terms of recognizing the distinction between functional and nonfunctional complaining behavior. It was also noted that channel complaints could be viewed as one type of behavioral response or outcome in the manifest stage of intrachannel conflict. The consequences can be constructive or destructive depending on how it is perceived and managed. The foregoing discussion is an attempt to integrate the functional and nonfunctional nature of complaining with conflict in channels.

The relationship between intrachannel complaining and conflict can be temporal or concurrent. On the one hand, a channel complaint can often precede other forms of manifest conflict and, depending on how it is managed, may exist alongside other types of conflictful behavior or may be replaced by it. On the other hand, because of the multiple-issue nature of the channel relationship it is equally likely that complaining and conflict may exist concurrently and reflect different levels of dissatisfaction or conflict over various issues.

The level of intrachannel conflict and its impact on complaining behavior is seen to be mediated by channel member perceptions of responsiveness to complaints. When a complaint is viewed as a mild expression of manifest conflict, it may serve either to complement or substitute other forms of conflictful behavior. This suggests that it may be myopic to examine complaining behavior to the exclusion of other forms of manifest conflict. Given the assumption that the channel issue over which there is dissatisfaction is an important one, then the relationship between complaining behavior and other forms of manifest conflict (non-complaining behavior) may be contingent on the perceived responsiveness to complaints. Such a possibility serves at the foundation of Figure 1.

It is hypothesized that when the level of conflict in the channel relationship is high and the perceived responsiveness positive, then one would expect more functional complaints and/or less other forms of manifest conflict. When channel members can communicate their dissatisfactions over channel issues and expect reasonable responses, they would be less likely to engage in other forms of conflictful behavior. This would also be the case for situations of low conflict and positive responsiveness. The difference would be reflected in the low frequency and intensity of other forms of manifest conflict.

In situations of high conflict and negative perceived responsiveness, we would expect more nonfunctional complaints and/or more serious forms of conflictful behavior. Channel members in such a situation can be seen as taking every opportunity to behave in a goal incongruent way either through nonfunctional complaining or other dysfunctional behaviors. When the level of conflict in the channel

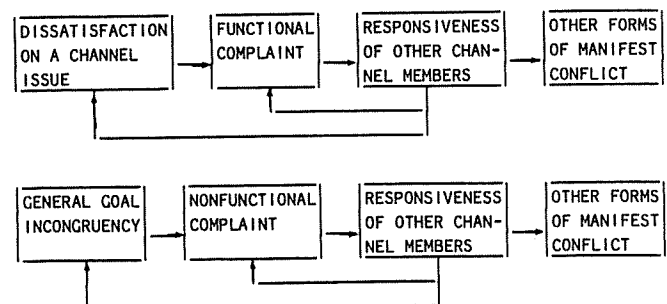
FIGURE 1  
Perceived Responsiveness, Intrachannel Conflict and Complaining Behavior

		Perceived Responsiveness	
		Positive	Negative
Conflict	High	More functional complaints &/or less other forms of manifest conflict	More nonfunctional complaints &/or more other forms of manifest conflict
	Low	More functional complaints &/or Less other forms of Manifest Conflict	Less Nonfunctional complaints &/or Less other forms of Manifest Conflict

relationship is low and the perceived responsiveness negative, the frequency and intensity of nonfunctional complaining and/or other forms of manifest conflict will be low.

When attempts to communicate conflicting goals through nonfunctional complaining or dissatisfaction through functional complaining are futile, then other more serious forms of conflictful behavior may exist. This suggests that we need to incorporate temporal and feedback elements in our analysis of the relationship between complaining behavior and conflict. This is summarized in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2  
Complaining and Intrachannel Conflict



The manner in which complaints are responded to and resolved will affect future complaining behavior. For functional complaints, it could result in (1) a reduction in dissatisfaction; (2) more functional complaining; or (3) other more serious forms of manifest conflict. For nonfunctional complaining, it could result in (1) a reduction in the degree of goal incongruency; (2) more nonfunctional complaining; or (3) other more serious forms of manifest conflict. Furthermore, the outcome of current resolution of complaints and conflict may feed back into a channel member's perceptions of responsiveness to complaints and therefore his/her future behavior.

Although we have focused only on the degree of responsiveness to complaints, there are other mediating variables that affect the the nature and intensity of intrachannel conflict and complaining behavior (cf. Frazier 1983). Some of these factors are outlined in the discussion section, and it is important to note that the nature of the relationship and the importance of these factors may change at different stages of the channel relationship.

## DISCUSSION

### Issues For Further Research

The brief review of the conflict literature suggests that complaining can be viewed as a manifestation of conflict in channels and as one of the wide range of behaviors that could take place in the manifest stage of the conflict process. It also raises a few other important issues regarding the domain of manifest conflict. First, should there be a distinction between the milder forms of manifest conflict (e.g., complaining and disagreements) versus more serious forms of manifest conflict (e.g., breaking off the channel relationship)? Second, is there a need to distinguish between a complaint and a disagreement? Finally, is it appropriate to define all channel disagreements as manifest conflict?

An effort must be made to distinguish between the milder and more serious forms of manifest conflict. From a conflict management perspective, recognizing and monitoring mild forms of manifest conflict, such as complaints, will facilitate the development of appropriate strategies and mechanisms to resolve the conflict before it reaches any serious level characterized by dysfunctional behavior such as refusal to cooperate on an important channel issue (e.g., promotion policy).

Additionally, we need to examine whether there is a distinction between a functional complaint and a disagreement (when they both are seen as reflections of manifest intrachannel conflict), and the relevance of this distinction. Intuitively, there is a distinction because a functional complaint reflects dissatisfaction with a channel issue and not necessarily disagreement with the issue. For example, a retailer may complain because of dissatisfaction with the untimely delivery of merchandise but does not necessarily disagree with the inventory policy. Here, the complaint would reflect dissatisfaction with the conduct or execution of the inventory policy, whereas a disagreement would reflect partial or total nonacceptance of the policy. Thus, based on this reasoning, a disagreement can be viewed as a more intense form of manifest conflict than a complaint. The relevance of this distinction is in the implication that different kinds of strategies and administrative mechanisms may be required in responding to and eventually resolving functional complaints and disagreements.

Manifest conflict in channels has frequently been defined in terms of verbal or written disagreements between channel members (Lusch 1976b; Brown and Day 1981). However, it may not be appropriate from a theoretical as well as from a conflict management perspective, to define all channel disagreements as manifest conflict. Some disagreements are borne out of concern for improving the channel relationship and therefore may not reflect conflict per se. For example, a retailer due his better monitoring of customer needs, habits and trends may disagree with a new product proposal by the manufacturer. Here, there is no conflict in the true

sense of the word but rather a genuine concern by the retailer to provide appropriate feedback on the feasibility of the new product proposal. However, the manufacturer may fail to see the true nature of the disagreement and perceive the retailer's disagreement as conflictful, that is, behavior that impedes the manufacturer's goal to introduce a new product (see Stern and Gorman (1969) definition of intrachannel conflict). Thus, only when the manufacturer perceives the true intention of the retailer, the disagreement would not be considered as conflictful but instead is viewed as positive feedback.

Other factors affecting the strength of the channel relationship and their subsequent impact on the nature and resolution of complaining and conflict need to be considered. In addition to perceived responsiveness to complaints, other important mediating variables include level of cooperation, degree and openness of intrachannel communication, existing power relationships in the channel, and the type and volume of product/service being handled by the channel.

### Implications For Channel Management

One important implication of viewing complaints as a mild form of manifest conflict is to aid the development of proactive rather than reactive strategies in dealing with conflict before it becomes dysfunctional. The other implication is that by "positioning" complaints as a manifestation of conflict rather than as another behavioral product of the channel relationship, it will encourage channel members to pay more serious attention to the causes and nature of complaints and the manner in which they can be resolved. This is borne out of the belief that conflict by its nature has a more serious connotation than a complaint; and therefore there is a natural tendency among academic researchers and managers to pay greater attention to conflict issues at the "expense" of complaint issues. In other words, the tolerance level for complaints is greater than that for conflict both qualitatively (in terms of its perceived repercussions on the channel relationship and type of managerial action) and quantitatively (in terms of the length of time it can be tolerated without the need for managerial action).

Furthermore, it is important to recognize the information content of viewing complaining and conflict as closely related. Verbal and written disagreements (manifest conflict) and complaints in a functional sense, represent efforts by channel members to provide feedback or communicate reasons for their dissatisfaction or displeasure with certain aspects of the channel relationship.

From a channel management perspective, management should encourage rather than inhibit functional complaining. This can be done in general by promoting greater intrachannel communication. Administrative mechanisms for facilitating as well as resolving complaints can be set up within each channel organization. This would serve as an indication of the channel participant's attitude toward the relationship as a whole, and if effectively managed would serve to motivate other channel members to do the same. Note that complaints in an intrachannel context flow in both directions within a focal dyad as well as horizontally and vertically across the channel system. Therefore, there is a need to monitor the source, nature, and frequency of these complaints. For centrally managed systems, it has implications for performance review in terms of causes of complaining and, in general, may also be a reflection of poor intrachannel coordination. Some manufacturers and retailers may already have departments and/or rules

and procedures set up to deal with complaints from their customers. It is therefore equally important to convince these channel institutions to extend their "customer orientation" to other participants in the channel system.

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