

H. Keith Hunt, Brigham Young University  
 H. David Hunt, Brigham Young University (student)  
 Tacy C. Hunt, Brigham Young University (student)

INTRODUCTION

At the 1979 American Marketing Association's Attitude Research Conference at Hilton Head Island, Dik Twedt introduced the concept of customer grudge holding in a paper titled "How Long Do Customers Carry Grudges?". This paper was discovered in my search a few years ago for all the papers written on consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining behavior which resulted in the lengthy CS/D & CB bibliography available in the previous CS/D & CB conference proceedings volumes. While the conceptual and measurement aspects of consumer dissatisfaction and complaining have progressed far beyond Dr. Twedt's insightful work, no one has yet stepped forward to give further consideration to the question of customer grudge holding.

Twedt hypothesized that "the customer's grudge against the brand would steadily decrease over time." His test was to categorize the complainants to a packaged food manufacturer according to how long it had been since they complained, using brand rating scores as the indication of the level of current satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the brand. Neighbors' satisfaction scores averaged 8.8. Complainers' satisfaction scores from 6 months to 36 months were 9.0, 8.2, 8.6, 9.2, 9.4, and 9.1. "Although the ratings of the complainants for the 7 months to 30 months time period do follow the direction anticipated by the hypothesis, the differences are neither large nor significant."

As we have more fully developed the conceptual foundation and measurement methods for consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining behavior research over the past 12 years I have wondered to just what extent customer grudge holding actually exists and what the surrounding influences affecting customer grudge holding are.

Keep in mind that this study is solely exploratory in its attempt to understand customer grudge holding. In that frame of thinking the first task was to find out if customer grudge holding really did exist. It seemed the simplest way to find out was to generally describe the concept to consumers and ask for examples from their own personal consuming experiences. We report more on this later, but for now we can simply report that, with the exception of teenagers, every consumer we talked to could very quickly tell us specific customer grudge holding cases, and the longer they talked about specific cases the more cases they thought of. Being sure now that customer grudge holding exists, we raise the next questions about what factors influence whether and to what degree it occurs.

THE STUDY

The factors we chose to consider came from the senior author's extensive involvement in the CS/D & CB research arena. At this stage we have not gone through an extensive literature search on grudge holding behavior. We don't even know if such literature exists. The factors seemed to fall into several groupings or categories: (1) degree of emotional upset, (2) the specifics of the incident, (3) whether based on treatment of the customer or performance of the product, (4) specifics of the product/service such as price and frequency of purchase, (5) whether complained to seller or manufacturer, (6) shared fault, and (7) status in family or living group.

Interviewing was done by the three authors across an age range from teenager to senior citizen. Except for trying to get as broad a cross section of respondents as possible there was no specific effort to approximate randomness in selecting respondents.

FINDINGS

Of the 78 grudge holding incidents reported, 52 (66.7%) were with products and 26 (33.3%) were with services. In this first exploratory effort we did not attempt any further break down than simply products and services. Future research on grudge holding needs to categorize services and products to get a better idea of the specifics of the behavior.

The degree of emotional upset is one of our most interesting findings. In two thirds of the incidents the consumer was very upset, and in almost a quarter of

<u>How Emotionally Upset Were You</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Not at all	1	1.3
Slightly	7	9.0
Somewhat	18	23.1
Very	50	64.1
No answer	2	2.5
	<u>78</u>	<u>100.0</u>

the incidents the consumer was somewhat upset for a total of 87.2% of the time grudge holding consumers were somewhat or very upset. Clearly, emotional upset is one of the conditions for grudge holding. What this study does not show is whether emotional upset by itself is sufficient for grudge holding to occur or whether other conditions are also necessary.

Some of these grudges have existed for a long time. A third of the grudges have been held for at least five years, some up to twenty years. Considering that in

<u>How Long Ago</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1 year or less	25	32
2-4 years	20	26
5-9 years	22	28
10-20 years	11	14
	<u>78</u>	<u>100</u>

many of these cases the consumer was a regular customer before the grudge incident occurred, the amount of lost business to the firm is substantial. While we had supposed that over time grudges would dissipate, this may happen only with some products. Further research will find out the grudge decay rate. Whatever the decay rate might be, these data show that a substantial residual remains. Remember that Dik Twedt's original paper on the topic dealt with the decay of grudge holding over time.

Of the 78 incidents, 38.5% occurred when shopping alone and 61.5% occurred when shopping with at least one other person. We had supposed that incidents which occurred when with others might be more arousing because of the social aspects of being embarrassed or whatever in front of others. The expectation was correct but the reason was not. 70.6% of the "others" were spouses and own children. The 32% of the incidents in which own children were the others were more the frustration of having the children with you shopping in the first place

and then something goes wrong in front of the children. What may have been a less-than-relaxed shopping trip in the first place suddenly becomes highly emotional.

Even though two thirds of the grudges were product oriented it was the treatment the customer received which seems to have had a serious impact on how upset the person got. In 10.3% of the incidents customers bore grudges because of both the product's performance and the store's treatment of them as customers. We see that 52 (66.7%) were not buying again because of the way

Reason	Frequency	Percent
Treatment	44	56.4
Performance	26	33.3
Both	<u>8</u>	<u>10.3</u>
	78	100.0

they were treated. 43.6% were not buying again because of poor product performance.

The grudge holding exists much more for items that are purchased only irregularly.

Regular Or Infrequent Purchase	Frequency	Percent
Regularly	24	30.8
Infrequently	51	65.4
First time	<u>3</u>	<u>3.8</u>
	78	100.0

The reported price of the grudge-related transaction ranged from a low of \$1 to a high of \$75,000. The highest prices were

Price	Frequency	Percent
0-9	17	21.8
10-24	18	23.1
25-99	18	23.1
100-999	13	16.7
1,000-75,000	<u>12</u>	<u>15.3</u>
	78	100.0

for new car purchases in the \$9,000 to \$17,000 range and four real estate transactions in the \$25,000 to \$75,000 range.

Marketers should be interested to know that 79.5% of the grudge holders continued to purchase the product or service but, of course, from another vendor.

We have had numerous reports over the years of the negative word-of-mouth generated by dissatisfied customers. It appears that the grudge holders are the champion negative word-of-mouthers. Many of the "told lots" responses could more adequately be phrased "told

Told Other People	Frequency	Percent
Don't think so	12	15.4
Maybe one person	5	6.4
Told a few people	25	32.1
Told lots of people	<u>36</u>	<u>46.1</u>
	78	100.0

everyone I could." Many of these people expressed that they felt they had to tell everyone they could because they wanted to keep others from being ripped off the same way they were. The grudge holders add a new dimension to the negative word-of-mouth findings of several previous studies.

Also consistent with earlier studies is the finding

that 52.6 complained while 47.4 did not complain. And, of the half who complained 97.7% of the complaints went

Complained To	Frequency	Percent
Seller/store	38	90.5
Manufacturer	1	2.3
Both	<u>3</u>	<u>7.2</u>
	42	100.0

to the store or seller. 9.5% went to the manufacturer. This again substantiates the finding in earlier papers that manufacturers are ill served if they use the number of complaints reaching them as an indication of overall satisfaction with their product or service. It also confirms that the stores/sellers take the brunt of the complaining process.

One of the most interesting findings was that in almost every case the consumer thought that whatever went wrong was totally and solely the fault of the seller, not the consumer. Where in other studies we sometimes hear admissions of joint fault, one of the

Whose Fault?	Frequency	Percent
All my fault	0	0
Mostly my fault	1	1.3
Both parties equally	1	1.3
Mostly their fault	4	5.1
All their fault	<u>72</u>	<u>92.3</u>
	78	100.0

identifying characteristics of grudge holders is that they consider whatever went wrong to be all the seller's fault and not at all their own fault. From this study we have no way of knowing what the true state of nature is. Perhaps this is simply another evidence of selective perception or even selective remembering over time. Or perhaps it is true. It will take a substantially different research design to tease out any additional information.

Just to give you a better feel for the respondents, they were 55.1% male and 44.9% female. Their ages ranged from 18 to 70. 35.9% were mothers, 47.4% were fathers, and 14.1% were children living at home.

At this point let me insert our non-data finding that we got more responses from people over 30 and got very few responses from anyone under 25. We tried specifically to get responses from late teenagers in the 16-20 bracket and although we talked to several we could not find a single instance of grudge holding in that age category. Responses for the 20-25 age bracket tended to have happened very recently, with few being over a year old. So we can say in an undocumented way that grudge holding is a phenomenon of the 30+ consumers, not of the youth. Perhaps we failed with the teenagers because of the way we asked the questions, but we don't think that was the problem. Teenagers couldn't think of any examples. And, as an overgeneralization, the older that people were the more grudges they held. The 60-70 group had lots of examples. And the 40-55 group had no difficulty in coming up with examples and generally said "if you need more come on back, I'm sure I've got lots more."

Finally, we need to give the reader some feel for the reasons consumers gave for holding the grudge. In the data that follow remember that there were only 78 respondents but some grudges were based on more than one reason.

CONCLUSION

<u>Reasons</u>	<u>Subcategory Frequency</u>	<u>Primary Category Frequency</u>	<u>Primary Category Frequency</u>
Unsatisfactory Product		26	26.8
Poor quality product	22		
Wrong size	1		
Didn't deliver what promised	2		
Product injured person, faulty	1		
Unsatisfactory Repairs		9	9.3
Repair not done correctly	5		
Repair not done on time	4		
Unsatisfactory Service		10	10.3
Poor service	9		
Changed policy on what offered, price	1		
Unsatisfactory Ad Items		4	4.1
Ad items not as advertised	1		
Ad items out of stock	3		
Unsatisfactory Return		10	10.3
Wouldn't take back flawed product	8		
Wouldn't take return, not flawed	2		
Unsatisfactory Treatment		26	26.8
Rude, inconsiderate	11		
Embarrassed customer	3		
High pressure selling	6		
Wouldn't take check	4		
Billing error, not corrected	2		
Unsatisfactory Integrity		12	12.4
Finding extra things wrong once started on repair	3		
Disclaimed involvement	2		
Got cheated	3		
Suggested something illegal	1		
Changed price on bid	2		
Wouldn't honor coupon	1		
		<u>97</u>	<u>100.0</u>

Remembering that this has been exploratory research with all the limitations such research carries with it, still we can offer some first glimpses of the phenomenon Dik Twedt called customer grudge holding. We can offer the following observations from our data.

1. Products were more often the cause than services (66.7% to 33.3%).
2. Grudge holders were emotionally upset at the incident and remain upset. (87.2% were very or somewhat upset.)
3. Some grudges have existed for a long time. (42% are at least 5 years old, 14% are at least 10 years old.)
4. Grudges were based more on treatment than on performance. (66.4% to 43.6%, where some reported both.)
5. Grudges are more often based on infrequent purchases than on regular purchases. (65% to 30.8%.)
6. The dollar amounts of the grudge incident range from \$1 to \$75,000.
7. 79.5% of the grudge holders continue to purchase the general product or service, so the amount of business lost by offenders is great.
8. Grudge holders are the all time champions of negative word-of-mouth. (78.2% told a lot of or a few people, with some reporting they still tell everyone they can about it, even after 5 or 10 years.)
9. Only half the grudge holders complained.
10. Grudge holders find the seller totally at fault (92.3%).
11. The older the consumer (more consuming experience) the greater the number of grudges they report and the easier time they have recalling them.
12. Grudges were primarily based on unsatisfactory product or unsatisfactory treatment (both 26% of all reasons mentioned). Unsatisfactory integrity was mentioned third most often. Repairs and services were not mentioned as often as we had expected.

We have learned a lot about consumer grudge holding from this simple exploratory study -- enough for someone to go ahead with a more elaborate, methodologically sound study to fully test our findings.

REFERENCES

Twedt, Dik, "How Long Do Customers Carry Grudges?," a paper presented at the American Marketing Association Tenth Annual Attitude Research Conference, Hilton Head Island, SC, February 28, 1979.

General knowledge seems to be that consumer dissatisfaction and complaints are most commonly based on unsatisfactory repairs or unsatisfactory service. However, our data show that while repairs and service are definite bases for grudge holding, unsatisfactory product and unsatisfactory treatment are much more common bases by a factor of 2 1/2 to 3 times. This is one more evidence that grudge holding is an extreme case of dissatisfaction and perhaps even something different from dissatisfaction. We were also surprised to find unsatisfactory integrity being the third most often reason for grudge holding.