AN EFFORT MODEL OF FIRST-STAGE COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an integrative model of consumer complaining behavior, in which effort is posited as the critical determinant of consumer complaint voicing in first-stage CCB. The model builds on the theoretical and empirical literature in decision making and pre-purchase search effort. It is necessary to distinguish between first-stage and latter-stage complaining because a) most dissatisfied consumers still do not voice complaints despite the best efforts of practitioners who prefer to hear complaints voiced directly to them, b) latter-stage complainants have already identified themselves as dissatisfied by voicing complaints, and c) their behavior tends to be responsive to recovery attempts rather than to initial dissatisfying experiences. The Effort Model (EM) suggests that anticipated effort mediates the relationship between CCB and well-known antecedents such as product importance, assertiveness, attitude toward complaining, experience, and time constraints. It is suggested that firms can increase the proportion of consumers voicing complaints by taking actions to reduce the amount of effort required to complain.

INTRODUCTION

It has become widely accepted that customer retention must receive high priority on the agenda of firms' managers (Reichheld 1996a, 1996b; Reichheld and Sasser 1990). Reichheld (1996b) notes that on average U.S. corporations lose about half their customers every five years, and that the most profitable companies have the lowest rates of customer turnover. Of course, managers fear that if their customers become dissatisfied, they will defect to competitors. However, besides defection, customers have other means of responding to problems they encounter with products and services (Andreasen 1985; Bearden and Teel 1983; Best and Andreasen 1977; Singh 1988). They can choose to engage in negative word-of-mouth to friends and family; they can voice complaints to the seller and seek redress; they can complain to outside authorities in an attempt to force the firm to redress their complaints; or they can simply do nothing and presumably make the best of it.

Of all these alternatives, many believe that it is in the firm's best interest to encourage customers to directly voice their complaints. Fornell and Wernerfelt (1987, 1988) show that by encouraging complaints, firms can guard against customer defections, thereby protecting or even enhancing market share while reducing customer acquisition costs. Complaining gives management an opportunity both to remedy specific problems that are episodic and limited to the individual customer, and to correct systemic problems that affect many individuals throughout the firm's customer base. Recognizing the critical importance of learning about problems, some firms have begun initiatives to prompt voicing by even mildly dissatisfied customers. Sheraton Hotels, for example, announced a program in which guests would receive cash payments for informing management about problems they encounter during their stays, and front-line employees are authorized to offer discounts, points, or other amenities to customers who complain (Paterik 2002).

Despite such programs, as well as a substantial amount of research in the CCB literature, surprisingly little progress has been made toward the goal of increasing the proportion of customers who voice complaints when they experience dissatisfaction. When Best and Andreasen (1977) and Day, Grabicke, Schaetzle, and Staubach (1981) published the first systematic investigations of customer complaining behavior, they found that only a small proportion of dissatisfied purchasers voiced complaints. Years later, studies of complaining behavior continued to report that few dissatisfied customers complain directly to the sellers. For example, a study by TARP showed that over 70% of the customers experiencing service failures did not complain (TARP, 1996). According to the TARP study, the

percent of customers who did not complain after experiencing dissatisfaction ranged from 58% for travel and leisure and 61% for financial services to 83% for consumer goods. More recently, Huppertz (2000) reported that although 30.9% of the patients in a healthcare setting experienced a service failure, the majority (66.4%) did not complain.

It is important to distinguish between genuine attempts by firms to encourage consumer complaints and less sincere verbalizations of opportunities to voice that hold little promise of redress. In some contexts, front-line employees of service providers prompt consumers to voice complaints as part of the service experience; for example, servers at a restaurant will almost invariably ask patrons questions like, "Everything OK here?" In such cases, they provide the consumer with an opportunity to complain, but if the answer comes back "No," it is far from certain that the service provider will do anything substantive to remedy the problem. Rather, these exchanges have become so routine that scripts have developed between consumers and service providers (Abelson 1981; Rook 1985), and few expect genuine complaints or remedies to result. In these contexts, consumers learn that they stand to gain little from complaining, so why bother?

Most of the research in the consumer complaining behavior literature has examined the responses of those who complain rather than those who do not. Complaining customers are easy to identify because they have already voiced their dissatisfaction and have attempted to achieve some resolution of their problems directly with the seller. The focus of these investigations has centered on the reactions of complainants to attempts by sellers to recover from their failures *after* they have learned of their complaints (Blodgett, Granbois, and Walters 1993; Blodgett, Hill, and Tax 1997; Maxham and Netemeyer 2002; McCollough, Berry, and Yadav 2000; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran 1998). Less easily identifiable are the "silent majority" of dissatisfied consumers who do not complain, but behave differently when they experience dissatisfaction. Such individuals represent the greatest risk to a firm at this first stage because managers cannot remedy a problem if they have never learned about it (Fornell and Westbrook 1984; Keaveney 1995; Richins 1987).

Stages of Consumer Complaining Behavior

Several authors have proposed expanded models of the consumer complaining process, recognizing that in many instances complaining behavior involves multiple steps which may or may not result in favorable outcomes. Blodgett and Granbois (1992) suggested that dissatisfied consumers who voice their complaints initiate a dynamic process in which success or failure in attaining perceived justice early on determines whether and what kind of complaining behavior occurs over time. Failure to achieve redress after voicing a complaint directly to the seller sets the stage for future action, namely negative word-of-mouth, exit, or lodging a third-party complaint (Blodgett and Granbois 1992, p. 93).

By considering CCB as a dynamic process, the model proposed by Blodgett and Granbois creates the framework for considering CCB as a multi-stage event. However, they focus attention on the latter stages, *after* a dissatisfied customer has voiced his/her complaint directly to the seller. In several studies Blodgett and his colleagues demonstrated that perceived justice resulting from early-stage voicing significantly predicted the negative word-of-mouth and repurchase intentions of complaining consumers later on (cf. Blodgett, Granbois, and Walters 1993; Blodgett, Hill, and Tax 1997; Blodgett and Tax 1993). However, Boote (1998, p. 146) argues that the CCB process does not usually work in such a fashion, and that it is "a distortion of reality to simply suggest that voice comes first, and all other CCB types are dependent on perceptions of justice relating to it." It is necessary to examine all forms of CCB responses in first-stage as well as in latter-stage complaining. And a key issue remains unresolved: What happens at the first stage to cause a dissatisfied consumer to voice a complaint?

Though a substantial body of research has addressed the antecedents of first-stage complaining behavior, some gaps in our

knowledge remain. Regarding complainants, the literature has examined a variety of demographic, personality, situational, and attitudinal factors. After reviewing this literature, Morel, Poiesz, and Wilke (1997, p. 465) concluded that although researchers have found sets of variables to significantly predict consumer complaining behavior, "it is not clear which variables contribute to the prediction of (consumer complaining behavior) and which ones do not." Maute and Forrester (1993, p.224) postulate that such disappointing results are attributable to a largely atheoretical approach to the study of complaining behavior, causing researchers to examine "the effect of haphazardly chosen predictors."

This paper attempts to fill these voids in the literature by examining a neglected area of consumer complaining behavior: consumer effort. Building upon the theoretical and empirical work on the effort construct, we briefly review the pertinent literature on effort and extend it to complaining behavior. We examine the moderating effects of some key situational and individual difference variables that have been shown to influence complaining behavior, using them to propose a new effort-based model of CCB.

Consumer Effort

Simply put, it takes work to complain. In most cases, a dissatisfied customer must take the initiative to contact the seller (either by phone or in person), explain the problem, hope that the seller will accept the explanation, and arrange for an acceptable remedy. Not only does this require physical effort and time, but the consumer must also invest cognitive effort to decide whether or not to complain and how to go about it. Generally, cognitive effort can be broken down into smaller components known as elementary information processes (EIPs), which vary across several kinds of decision strategies for completing a choice task (Bettman, Johnson, and Payne 1990; Payne, Bettman, and Johnson 1993). Bettman and colleagues (1990) have demonstrated that the greater the number of EIPs a strategy requires, the longer it takes a decision maker to process information and arrive at a conclusion. They have validated these measures against self-reports of effort expended on a variety of decision tasks using a variety of strategies.

The literature on pre-purchase search effort informs our understanding of the antecedents of consumer effort expenditures, and this research can be applied to consumer complaining situations. Beatty and Smith (1987) found relationships between external search effort and purchase involvement, attitudes toward shopping, time availability, and product class knowledge in a consumer electronics purchase context. Similarly, Clarke and Belk (1979) found that both product involvement and situational task importance increase anticipated purchase effort. These variables bear similarity to the antecedents of CCB in the complaining literature, and they are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Comparison of Search Effort Antecedents and CCB Antecedents

Factors Affecting Search Effort		Factors Affecting Complaining Effort
Purchase involvement	→	Product importance
Attitude toward shopping	→	Attitude toward complaining
Time availability	→	Time availability
Product class knowledge	→	Experience

Effort involves the expenditure of limited resources, such as time and processing capacity. The notion that people are "cognitive misers" (Fiske and Taylor 1984) implies that consumers will expend the minimum possible amount of effort to arrive at a satisfactory decision. For example, in a study of consumers' search for information about new products, Ozanne, Brucks, and Grewal (1992) found that when new products are very difficult to categorize, consumers attempt to manage their cognitive effort by limiting the amount of work they devote to searching for information about the products. That consumers choose to limit their expenditure of search effort

often results in less than optimal purchase decisions, prompting Garbarino and Edell (1997, p. 148) to conclude, "it is clear that people are willing to forgo some benefits to conserve cognitive effort."

The role of effort in consumer decision processes is not limited to pre-purchase search behavior. Soman (1998) demonstrated that effort has a significant effect on consumers' post-purchase decisions. In his study, subjects were presented with a choice task in which an advertised brand came with a rebate that required purchasers to travel to a store which was either ten or twenty miles away in order to redeem it. The level of post-purchase effort had no effect on brand choice, but the level of redemptions declined with increasing levels of required effort.

Effort in Complaining Behavior

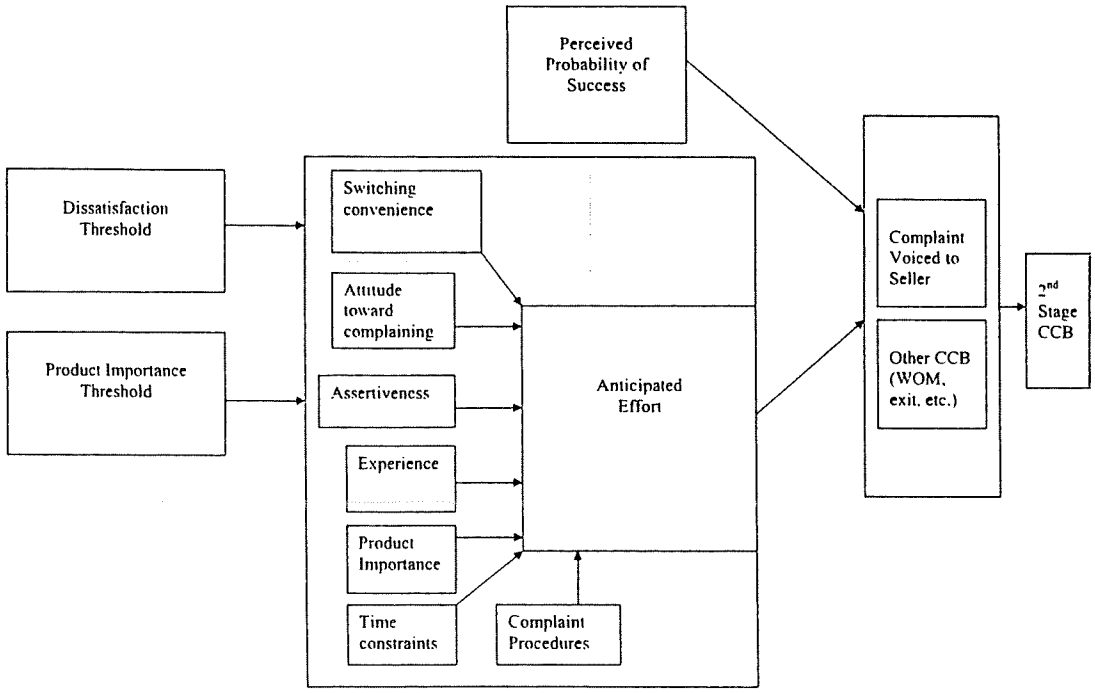
Although the effort construct has been used extensively in research on pre-purchase search, purchase decision making, and consumption, effort has been neither explicitly defined nor systematically researched in a consumer complaining context. The effort construct has most often been incorporated into a perceived "cost-benefit" factor expected to influence consumers' decisions to voice complaints (Andreasen 1985; Day 1984; Fornell and Didow 1980; Richins 1979). Consumers are hypothesized to make a mental judgment of "worth it" versus "not worth it," based on their simultaneous assessment of the probability of success, the effort it takes to complain, and the value of the product involved. These three factors were first suggested by Hirschman (1970); however, the research to date has not systematically investigated the role of effort in the consumer's decision to voice a complaint.

The cost of complaining has been included in some models of consumer complaining behavior. As Hirschman (1970) noted, the cost of voicing is greater than the cost of exit, and is often greater than the benefit to be gained from redress. Extending this logic, Richins (1982) created Guttman scales from consumers' alternative responses to dissatisfaction in an attempt to measure complaining behavior along a single, quantitative interval scale. The behaviors ranged from mild (e.g., not leaving a tip at a restaurant) to extreme (writing a complaint letter to a business). Similarly, Bearden and Teel (1983, p.24) used a Guttman scale to "reflect increasing intensity of complaint actions." This approach seems to have been abandoned when further research demonstrated that behavioral responses to dissatisfaction are complex and multi-dimensional.

Nonetheless, the idea of trying to align various complaining behaviors along a one-dimensional scale is an intriguing one. On what premise did Richins (1982) and Bearden and Teel (1983) base their decisions to scale the different complaining behaviors? I maintain that disparate reactions to dissatisfaction could be scaled because all of them are related to the latent variable of effort. In fact, Richins (1983b, p. 70) ranked three alternative responses to dissatisfaction "a priori by the level of effort involved. Doing nothing, for instance, requires no effort or resources, while making a complaint often involves a great deal of effort and inconvenience. Telling others about the dissatisfaction requires a low to intermediate level of effort expenditure." Though intuitively logical, no empirical data has been offered to support these effort-based rankings of alternative responses to dissatisfaction. If, as Richins (1983b) suggests, complaining directly to the seller requires a great deal of effort compared to other behavioral responses, voicing should be relatively infrequent among dissatisfied customers – and it is infrequent. Anticipated effort should be considered a significant and powerful predictor of the consumer's decision whether or not to voice a complaint.

This analysis helps explain the problems that researchers have identified with current CCB models that focus on a single behavioral response to dissatisfaction. Singh (1988) showed that alternative complaining behaviors are in reality quite different from each other, and people choose one over the other depending on their own personal styles (preferences) and situational factors. However, Halstead (2002) and Boote (1998) maintain that multiple CCB actions can be taken in response to dissatisfaction, and that

Figure 1
Effort Model of First-Stage Complaining Behavior



limiting the investigation to one complaining behavior does not correspond to what happens in real life. They point out that people who voice complaints frequently engage in negative WOM as well. The effort framework postulates that the ease of engaging in negative WOM with friends and relatives makes this response likely to be added to complaints voiced to the seller. For example, very little effort is needed to include a recounting of problems with a retailer in the course of casual social conversation with a friend.

AN EFFORT MODEL OF CCB

The Effort Model (EM) is summarized in Figure 1. Because of its importance in the CCB process, the EM focuses solely on first-stage CCB. First-stage CCB is defined as the initial behavioral response(s) to dissatisfaction with a purchase or service encounter.

The EM builds upon the conceptual work by Blodgett and Granbois (1992) and Kowalski (1996). A central contribution of these authors' models is the status they endow upon voicing. Complaining responses are grouped into two major categories: 1) voicing and 2) WOM/exit/other. The significance of this dichotomous definition of CCB should not be overlooked. Because firms need to hear about problems as soon after the dissatisfying episode as possible, encouraging voice complaints at the first stage is of critical importance. Although CCB researchers have expanded the concept of complaining behavior to include a variety of other responses, *the essential nature of complaining behavior is voice.*

The Effort Model presumes that dissatisfaction is a necessary but not sufficient condition for CCB to occur, and that the consumer has experienced a level of dissatisfaction high enough to initiate the various antecedents of CCB. That is, a "dissatisfaction threshold" exists (Day 1984; Kowalski 1996), and having crossed it, the consumer must decide what course of action to

pursue.

Product importance represents another threshold the consumer must cross before seriously considering complaint action. If a product or service is unimportant, it is unlikely that the consumer will entertain any thoughts of complaining about it. Just as Day (1984) suggested that a threshold may apply to intensity of dissatisfaction as a predictor of complaining behavior, a similar threshold applies to product importance. There are some products (both goods and services) that are important enough to complain about if something goes wrong, while others are not worth the trouble. Rather than considering product importance as a continuous variable that directly influences CCB, in the EM it is a discrete variable with two levels: worth complaining about versus not worth complaining about. The variables that have been shown to predict CCB are likely to have less impact on complaining if the product or service is unimportant. For example, assertiveness has been shown to correlate with voice (Richins 1983a; Slama and Celuch 1994); but even the most assertive person is unlikely to complain about a product he considers unimportant.

The EM represents a departure from previously articulated conceptualizations of the complaining decision process. Day (1984) postulated that the consumer's assertiveness and attitude toward complaining directly affect her decision to voice a complaint, as does her cost-benefit calculation. By contrast, in the EM framework, experience, assertiveness, and the consumer's attitude toward complaining influence her perception of the effort required to complain, which in turn affects her decision of whether or not to complain.

In addition, the EM departs from Blodgett and Granbois (1992) in that dissatisfaction completely mediates all attribution effects. Attribution of fault, controllability, and responsibility (Folkes 1984, 1988) affect the consumer's satisfaction/dissatisfaction judgments, but do not directly impact CCB. This is consistent with Boote's (1998) thesis that attributions influence whether the consumer crosses the threshold of dissatisfaction required for complaining. It is also supported by Richins (1985) who found a significant path between attribution and level of dissatisfaction, but no significant direct link between attribution and complaint behavior. Thus, attribution-related variables have no place in the EM.

Note that the Effort specified in the EM refers to *perceived* effort, rather than a measure created from a weighted combination of individual elements, like the elementary information processes used by Bettman, Payne, and Johnson (1990) in their decision strategy experiments. EIPs work well in controlled laboratory studies using homogeneous subject populations, but in diverse consumer populations, the same action is likely to involve different levels of perceived effort. For example, Richins (1979, p. 52) observed that:

> "Two consumers may both perceive it equally likely that registering a complaint will involve making a special trip to the retail store. For one consumer this might be a rather simple and routine matter. For the other, however, the presence of small children in the household, lack of convenient transportation, or a busy time schedule may make the trip especially costly or difficult."

It is important to separate measures of effort from such situational factors and individual differences. Payne, Bettman, and Johnson (1993) propose a simple scaled measure of perceived effort that they use to validate EIPs in laboratory experiments; we propose adapting this measure to the EM.

EFFORT MODEL INTERPRETATION OF CCB ANTECEDENTS

It is instructive to briefly address the principal antecedents of first-stage complaining from the CCB literature and discuss their role in the EM.

Switching Convenience

When consumers have a great deal of choice and switching is relatively easy, voicing

complaints is harder than simply switching brands, stores, or service providers (Fornell and Didow 1980). By contrast, when the customer's alternatives are limited, dissatisfaction does not usually prompt switching (Andreasen 1985; Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000; Maute and Forrester 1993).

The customer who complains when alternative choices exist could be demonstrating loyalty by signaling the firm that something wrong needs fixing. In some respects, complaining behavior could be considered a form of loyalty, especially in markets where highly competitive conditions exist (Hirschman 1970).

Assertiveness and Attitude toward Complaining

Researchers have examined the effects of attitudinal and personality factors on consumer complaining behavior, including consumers' attitudes toward complaining (Best and Andreasen 1977; Halstead and Droge 1991; Richins 1982, 1987; Singh 1988) and their assertiveness (Fornell and Westbrook 1979; Richins 1983a; Singh 1990; Slama and Celuch 1994). In these streams of research, investigators have explored the hypotheses that the likelihood of complaining is significantly greater when the complainant is assertive and/or has a positive attitude toward the act. However, empirical findings have only weakly supported these hypotheses. For example, Fornell and Westbrook (1979) and Slama and Celuch (1994) report weak (though significant) relationships between measures of assertiveness and consumer complaining behavior. Likewise, Halstead and Droge (1991) found that attitudes toward complaining explain just 6% of the variance in consumers' complaint intentions. And Leary and Kowalski (1995) found mild negative correlations between measures of social anxiety and high-assertiveness confrontation behaviors, including complaining.

None of these studies has linked such attitudinal and personality characteristics to consumer effort. It takes more effort for an individual who is low in assertiveness to engage in a confrontation with a seller than it does for a highly assertive person. Similarly, the higher likelihood of voicing by consumers who have positive attitudes toward complaining can be explained by the effort construct. Consumers with a positive attitude toward complaining find it easy to approach sellers whenever they are dissatisfied, while those with a negative attitude toward complaining will find it quite difficult to voice their grievances no matter how justified they may be. The EM predicts that these individual difference factors will influence the perceived effort required to complain.

Experience

Prior experience has also been shown to affect complaining behavior. Two kinds of experience have been investigated in the consumer complaining literature: a) marketplace participation or experience as buyers of goods and services, and b) prior experience complaining about dissatisfactory purchases. Generally, less experienced consumers are less likely to complain than those with more experience in the marketplace (Morel, Poiesz, and Wilke 1997). Marketplace experience has been proposed as an explanation for investigators' findings of small but significant correlations between socio-demographics and complaining behavior (Day, et al. 1981). Consumers with higher levels of education and more disposable income have been found to be more likely than others to voice complaints (Warland, Herrmann, and Willits 1975). The effects of demographics on voicing complaints is due to the greater levels of experience that wealthier and better-educated individuals enjoy as purchasers of goods and services (Gronhaug and Zaltman 1981).

In the EM framework, experience (both marketplace participation and prior experience voicing complaints) makes subsequent complaining less effortful. This view is supported by research on the effects of experience or familiarity on consumers' purchase decision processes. Generally, the more experience the consumer has with a seller or service provider, the easier it is to evaluate the seller's goods or services (Brucks 1985). Berry, Seiders, and

Grewal (2002, p. 11) conclude that "consumers who know where to go and what to do as participants in a service operation minimize wasted time and energy." This knowledge is learned by decision makers as they gain feedback about the difficulty of decision tasks they experience in a variety of settings (Fennema and Kleinmutz 1995). In addition, consumers learn how to participate in the co-production of services with service providers through experience and by organizational socialization initiatives by the firm (Kelley, Donnelly, and Skinner 1990). As they gain complaining experience, consumers learn how to minimize the effort required to voice complaints in various settings.

In addition, consumers who have more experience in the marketplace enjoy a greater level of comfort interacting with sellers, thereby lowering the amount of effort they perceive it will take to complain, and increasing the probability that they will complain.

Time Constraints

By exploring demographics of complainers vs. non-complainers, some of the earliest studies of CCB took into account individuals' personal circumstances that either facilitated or hindered their ability to voice complaints (e.g., Gronhaug 1977; Gronhaug and Zaltman 1981). For example, elderly consumers who have limited means of transportation will be less likely to complain simply because they cannot get to a store to return something they find dissatisfactory. Andreasen and Manning (1990) found that the incidence of voicing was extremely low among vulnerable consumers, whom they defined as challenged and/or disadvantaged sub-populations that have extraordinary difficulty seeking redress because of societal stigmata, discrimination, and inexperience. However, beyond these special sub-populations, research in this field has shown weak correlations between demographics and complaining behavior.

Few would argue that demographic sub-populations vary in the amount of time available for discretionary activities (Kolodinsky 1993, 1995). For example, a dual-career married couple in their thirties with four children at home is more pressed for time than a single person in her mid-twenties living in an apartment. Time constraints prompt individuals to limit the amount of effort they invest in a variety of consumer problem-solving tasks (Garbarino and Edell 1997). The time available for voicing complaints is an overlooked component of the CCB decision process. For instance, Morel, et al. (1997) propose a triad model (motivation, capacity, and opportunity) to predict CCB; but their definition of "capacity" is limited to experience in the category investigated. In the EM *time constraints* formalize this aspect of capacity for voicing.

Note, however, that the perception of discretionary time is subjective (Marmorstein, Grewal, and Fishe 1992), so the absolute quantity of time available for discretionary activities will not be the best predictor of effort.

Complaining Procedures

Recognizing the importance of hearing about problems as soon as they occur, a number of firms have attempted to simplify their complaint handling processes and procedures, thus reducing the amount of time and effort dissatisfied consumers must invest in order to voice complaints.

Although firms use a variety of methods to mitigate the effort it takes to complain (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1988; Tax and Brown 1998), including toll-free telephone numbers, instructional literature with purchases, signs at the point of purchase or at point of service, and Internet websites, it is not clear whether these methods are sufficient to produce increases in the small percentage of consumers who complain. Kolodinsky (1993) found that enhanced customer service efforts (i.e., making it easier to access the firm's representatives) were marginally significant ($p < .10$) predictors of consumer complaining in a healthcare setting. However, Owens and Hausknecht (1999) found that by simplifying the complaint process, customers were significantly more likely to return complaint forms to the firm. Very little research has addressed this issue, and nothing from an effort perspective has been done.

If firms take more aggressive actions to simplify the complaint handling process, the EM framework predicts that complaints voiced directly to the firm will increase.

Perceived Probability of Success

The dissatisfied consumer's perceived likelihood of obtaining justice through voicing has long been recognized as an important determinant of CCB (Blodgett and Anderson 2000; Day 1984; Hirschman 1970; Landon 1977; Richins 1979). A dissatisfied customer's decision to voice a complaint rather than defecting to a competitor depends, in part, on her estimation of the probability of achieving a positive outcome: "...the decision whether to exit will often be taken *in the light of the prospects for the effective use of voice.* If customers are sufficiently convinced that voice will be effective, then they may well *postpone* exit" (Hirschman 1970, p.37, italics in the original). If a customer complains, she does so with the expectation that things will improve. Research findings in the CCB literature have supported this hypothesis, as perceptions of the likelihood of obtaining redress have been found to influence dissatisfied consumers' complaining behavior (Blodgett, Granbois and Walters 1993; Richins 1983b, 1985, 1987).

Much work remains to be done to understand the relationships between effort, perceived probability of success, and CCB. Landon (1977) simply noted that dissatisfied consumers perform a mental cost-benefit analysis. Day (1984) posited two independent variables, perceived costs of complaining and subjective probability that complaining will be successful, which would be combined along with knowledge/experience and significance of the consumption event (importance) in an analysis of alternatives. Yet, it is unclear whether probability of success and effort (i.e., perceived costs of complaining, in Day's framework) are truly independent: it stands to reason that a consumer who perceives that his complaint would be welcome by the seller would also believe he will need less effort to voice it. Until further research can clarify the relationships between these constructs, perceived probability of success is included in the EM as a separate variable that directly influences the complaining decision along with perceived effort, and a dotted line represents the possible moderating or interactive relationship between the two.

DISCUSSION

In the EM framework, anticipated effort is posited as a critical determinant of complaining behavior. The effort construct has been widely used in pre-purchase search behavior, where studies have demonstrated links between consumer behavior and variables that bear remarkable similarity to well-known antecedents of CCB. In addition, the EM provides a theoretical foundation for research on CCB responses to dissatisfaction. The central contribution of this article is the formalization of effort in our understanding of the dissatisfied consumer's complaining decision process. Those who find it easier to complain are more likely to voice their complaints directly to a seller than are individuals who find it difficult, and effort is posited to mediate the relationship between attitudinal, situational, personality, and experience factors and the consumer's decision to complain.

The fact that effort is proposed as a mediating (as opposed to moderating) variable implies that anticipated effort plays a crucial role in dissatisfied consumers' decision making, one that has not been heretofore recognized. This contention is supported by research outside the CCB domain, which has demonstrated the key role of effort in a variety of contexts, including decision-making and job performance. For instance, researchers investigating the cognitive processes involved in choice decisions have consistently found that decision makers appear to trade off accuracy for effort (Creyer and Ross 1993; Fennema and Kleinmutz 1995; Garbarino and Edell 1997; Josephs and Hahn 1995; Johnson and Payne 1985). People are willing to settle for less than ideal decisions to conserve effort, especially when the outcome is uncertain. In a series of studies of salespersons' job performance, Brown and colleagues (Brown and Leigh 1996; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, and Slocum 1999)

found that effort fully mediated the effects of situational, attitudinal and individual differences factors. Time and again, effort (both expended and anticipated) has been found to play a mediating role in explaining behaviors that involve judgment and decisions about tasks. These studies are relevant to CCB because a dissatisfied consumer's decision to voice a complaint is a task whose outcome is uncertain and involves work. Applying the findings to consumer complaining, we predict that effort will mediate the relationship between CCB and attitudinal, situational, and individual differences antecedents. Empirical research is needed to test these proposed relationships.

Two other studies by Richins (1979; 1982) help support the thesis that effort should be considered a mediating as opposed to a moderating variable. Richins (1979) found moderate levels of relationship between the costs and benefits of complaining and actual consumer complaining behavior. Though other antecedents such as attitude toward complaining and assertiveness were not included in the study, several items considered "costs" have been used in subsequent studies to measure these constructs. For example, Richins (1979) included "Be considered too much of a complainer" and "Would feel guilty about complaining" in her measures of costs. Similar items have appeared in studies of the effects of attitudes toward complaining and assertiveness. Separating these items from measures such as "Special trip to store to complain" and "Time and effort to fill out forms" would make a significant contribution toward understanding the relative contribution of effort (versus attitudes toward complaining and individual differences) to the understanding of the decision to complain. Further insight is provided by Richins (1982) who found attitudes toward complaining accounted for about 14% to 18% of the variance in self-reported CCB. However, the fact that CCB had been measured using a Guttman scale of various complaining responses (to reflect varying levels of effortful actions) suggests that the latent variable effort may have influenced the reported relationships.

Finally, Kowalski (1996, p. 180) proposed a model of complaining behavior that included "Assessment of Utility of Complaining" as a mediating variable between dissatisfaction, self-focus (an individual differences variable), and the decision whether or not to complain. No other antecedents were included. Although no data were presented, this model assigns great importance to the construct of effort, which is included in a cost-benefit perception and labeled "Utility."

There are several important implications of the EM conceptualization of complaining behavior. If perceived effort is shown to affect the customer's decision of whether or not to voice a complaint, the question arises as to whether deliberately reducing that level of effort will generate higher levels of voicing behavior. Can firms initiate programs or mechanisms that effectively reduce the dissatisfied customer's perceived level of effort enough so that he/she will be more likely to voice a complaint? Can the firm increase the number of voiced complaints from non-assertive and complaint-averse customers by reducing the effort they must expend?

The notion that reducing consumer effort will result in positive outcomes for the firm is supported by Smith, Bolton, and Wagner (1999), who found that when the firm *initiated* service recovery without the customer having to complain about a service failure, consumers reacted in a positive manner. The subjects in their study rated all three justice dimensions (distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice) of the firm's response to service failures more favorably when the firm initiated service recovery. When consumers do not have to initiate voice complaints about service failure, the amount of effort they must expend is greatly reduced. By initiating more aggressive steps to reduce the effort it takes to complain, we posit that firms can reduce or even eliminate the customer's need to invest more resources into the exchange by complaining, thereby helping to bring about a perception of fairness to the relationship. Empirical research is needed to validate these hypotheses.

To the extent that different complaining behaviors require varying amounts of effort and can be so arrayed (Bearden and Teel 1983,

Richins 1982), it is possible for the EM to be expanded to enhance the prediction of these behaviors. For instance, if negative WOM lies between complaining and doing nothing, a moderate amount of anticipated effort may be associated with WOM. Further research can uncover such links, and empirical data is needed to examine these relationships.

Future research should also explore the possibility of interactions among the constructs in the EM, which are posited to be independent at present. For example, the EM predicts that if firms reduce the obstacles to complaining, complaints voiced directly to the firm will increase. To the extent that consumers are reluctant to complain because they are either not assertive, or because they hold negative attitudes toward the act of complaining, more aggressive actions by the firm to reduce effort may encourage these individuals to voice complaints more than their assertive, experienced counterparts. Assertive, experienced consumers who have a positive attitude toward complaining have little difficulty voicing their complaints, so we would expect them to complain regardless of actions by the firm to make complaining easier. These relationships should be explored with empirical data.

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