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The impact of selected customer characteristics and response time on E-complaint satisfaction and return intent

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Abstract

Customer service centers have become an important element in the complaint-handling process. In response to the changing needs of the Cyber customer, many hospitality companies have put the power to complain in the hands of their customers via e-mail complaints. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the impact of customers' technology readiness or enthusiasm and response time on satisfaction with the complaint handling process and return intent. The data collection involved re-contacting hotel guests ($n = 446$) who had lodged a complaint with the sponsoring hotel company via e-mail. Our findings indicate that satisfaction with the problem handling and repurchase intentions are directly related to the time taken to respond. Moreover, technology enthusiasts were more demanding of an immediate response than their counterparts, who tend to be less responsive to advances in information technology. Implications to electronic complaint management systems are briefly discussed.

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1. Introduction

With a quarter of a billion Internet users worldwide (Keavney and Parthasarathy, 2001), an increasing number of hotel companies are using information technology to handle customer complaints. Hilton's 35-member Guest Assistance Team, for instance, handles e-mail complaints for all domestic Hilton properties

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(Zickefoose, 2001). Technological innovations and advances will continue to be crucial components of customer-firm interactions (Meuter et al., 2000). Yet, relatively little is known about how technology affects customer evaluations of the recovery process (Bitner et al., 2000).

The lack of understanding of how hotel guests perceive complaint handling processes in the on-line world is bothersome, since poor problem handling results in lost customers and negative word-of-mouth (Bitner et al., 1994; Keaveney, 1995; Tax, 1998). The main purpose of this study is to gain insight into two questions: (1) how do selected consumer characteristics (i.e. technology readiness or enthusiasm) influence guest perceptions of Web-based complaint handling processes, and (2) how crucial is the speed of response in post-recovery satisfaction? Previous work shows that consumers differ in their enthusiasm for information technology (e.g., Parasuraman, 2000). Some customers readily embrace the capabilities of the Web in lodging complaints, while others seem to prefer the more traditional face-to-face or voice-to-voice mode (Tax and Brown, 2000). Prior research also suggests that a fast response has a positive impact on customer evaluations (Clark et al., 1992; Hart et al., 1990; Smith et al., 1999), while there is a negative relationship between delay and satisfaction with problem handling (Taylor, 1994; Boshoff, 1997). In sum, customer-specific attributes (i.e. technology readiness) might influence customer perceptions of e-complaint handling, including the speed of response.

This article is organized as follows: We will first discuss the role of technology readiness in influencing customer expectations for service recovery. The second section explains the methodology used in the study followed by a summary of the results. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications and limitations of the results, along with directions for future research.

1.1. Technology enthusiasm and service recovery

The pyramid model introduced by Parasuraman (1996) incorporates technology as a new dimension to the services management triangle model. To maximize marketing effectiveness, company-technology, technology-employee and technology-customer interfaces must be well managed. To gain insight into the technology-customer link, Parasuraman (2000) developed an instrument measuring consumers' technology readiness. This construct refers to people's propensity to embrace and use new technologies for accomplishing goals in home life and at work. Because customers vary in their readiness to accept technological advances in service delivery, consumers' receptivity to technology must be addressed in market segmentation strategies (Barnes et al., 2000). For example, technologically comfortable consumers might have lower levels of "need for interaction" with the provider (Dabholkar, 2000). Consequently, handling complaints or recovering from failures on the Web might be particularly well-received by this market segment. Conversely, a face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction might be preferred by consumers who are less familiar with electronic communication.

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