

Customer satisfaction in industrial markets: dimensional and multiple role issues

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Abstract

While customer satisfaction has recently attracted a lot of attention among academics and practitioners, most academic research on this construct has focused on consumer goods using the individual consumer as the unit of analysis. Customer satisfaction in industrial markets is an under-researched area so far. The authors develop a valid customer satisfaction measure for industrial customers (called INDSAT). The development of the scale is based on field interviews as well as statistical analyses of two large samples of over 2500 customer responses in 12 European countries. The scale consisting of seven distinct satisfaction dimensions exhibits desirable psychometric properties. The seven-dimensional structure is found to be superior to more parsimonious structures. Additionally, the authors hypothesize differences in the satisfaction dimensions' importance across different roles in the buying center (referred to as "multiple role issues"). These considerations are supported by empirical results. Implications of the findings for researchers and industrial marketers are furthermore discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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The last decades have spawned a number of studies on customer satisfaction. A key motivation for the growing emphasis on customer satisfaction is that highly satisfied customers can lead to a stronger competitive position resulting in higher market share and profit (Fornell, 1992). Customer satisfaction is also generally assumed to be a significant determinant of repeat sales, positive word-of-mouth, and customer loyalty (Bearden and Teel, 1983; Fornell et al., 1996). As a result, there is increasing attention among academics and business practitioners to customer satisfaction as a corporate goal (e.g. Bolton and Drew, 1991; Crosby, 1991; Oliva et al., 1992). Partly, this increasing focus on customer satisfaction is rooted in contemporary managerial tools such as total quality management (TQM) and business process reengineering. The TQM movement has especially led to more focus on the measurement of the complex construct of customer satisfaction. This is particularly evident in the application guidelines of the famous *Baldrige Award* (see National

Institute of Standards and Technology, 1994). Recently, the widespread interest in customer satisfaction has led to the development of national customer satisfaction indices in different countries including Sweden (Fornell, 1992; Anderson et al., 1994), the US (Fornell et al., 1996) and Germany (Meyer and Dornach, 1997).

Most research on customer satisfaction has focused on satisfaction with consumer goods and services (see Oliver, 1996, for an overview), thus using the individual consumer as the unit of analysis (see e.g. Cadotte et al., 1987; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Spreng et al., 1996). Research on customer satisfaction in business-to-business relationships is still modest and lagging far behind consumer marketing. Unlike in services marketing, where SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988, 1991, 1994) has become a reasonably well accepted model for measuring the extent to which a company meets its customers' expectations, a widely used measure of industrial customers' satisfaction does not exist to the best of our knowledge.

It has been said that in industrial markets, relationships are long-term oriented, enduring, and complex (Ford, 1980; Hakansson, 1982; Turnbull and Wilson, 1989; Hutt and Speh, 1992). The relationships between buyers and sellers

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are often bilateral and the products need to be customized to the buyers' needs. Therefore, the customer is no longer a passive buyer, but an active partner. Against this background, the satisfaction of the customer may play an important role in establishing, developing, and maintaining successful customer relationships in industrial markets. Clearly, the construct of customer satisfaction for industrial customers is of sufficient importance both theoretically and managerially to warrant more attention.

Our article makes several contributions: first and most important, our purpose is to develop a multiple-item measure of industrial customer satisfaction and assess its psychometric properties based on an international data set. Second, the influence of the identified dimensions of customer satisfaction on overall satisfaction is analyzed. Third, as buying decisions in industrial companies are usually not individual but group decisions (see, e.g. Webster and Wind, 1972a; Lilien and Wong, 1984; Haas, 1989) we analyze differences in customer satisfaction between functional categories of the members of the buying center (referred to as "multiple role issues"). A buying center may be defined as an "informal, cross-sectional decision-unit, in which the primary objective is the acquisition, importation, and processing of purchasing-related information" (Spekman and Stern, 1979, p. 56). We will focus on customer satisfaction for industrial firms, specifically customer satisfaction in customer-supplier relationships. Customer satisfaction in marketing channels, i.e. satisfaction of a dealer with the overall relationship with a manufacturer (see Ruckert and Churchill, 1984; Schul et al., 1985; Gassenheimer et al., 1989) thus is not considered in this paper.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section, the conceptual basis of our study will be developed. In the two sections to follow, we describe the research method and the scale development and validation. After this, multiple role issues are analyzed. Finally, we discuss theoretical, methodological, and managerial implications and offer directions for future research.

1. Conceptual development

1.1. Overview

To the best of our knowledge, there is no comprehensive academic study of industrial customer satisfaction. Research using the construct has typically focused on very specific aspects. They include, e.g. customer satisfaction in the context of complaining behavior (e.g. Williams and Gray, 1978; Trawick and Swan, 1981) and the impact of the industrial buyer's perception of the purchase process on satisfaction (Tanner, 1996). A second limitation of previous research is its reliance on single-item measures (Trawick and Swan, 1981; Qualls and Rosa, 1995) or multiple-item (but uni-dimensional)

measures (Han, 1992; Han and Wilson, 1992; Dwyer, 1993) of industrial customer satisfaction. Given the complexity of customer-supplier interaction in industrial marketing (Hakansson, 1982, p. 14), it seems questionable whether previous operationalizations of industrial customer satisfaction can adequately capture the construct's domain. A valid measurement scale for the satisfaction of industrial customers is not available in the literature.

As previous work directly related to industrial customer satisfaction provides only limited insight into the construct's nature, we will take a broader perspective on literature in the industrial marketing area. This section focuses on three key issues associated with industrial customers' satisfaction. First, we identify possible dimensions of customer satisfaction in industrial markets. Second, we discuss different roles in the buying center in the context of industrial customer satisfaction. Third, we look for guidance on how to design the scale.

1.2. Content and dimensionality of industrial customer satisfaction

Prior to discussing potential dimensions of the construct under consideration, we need to identify the object of industrial customer satisfaction. Research in the consumer goods area typically relates satisfaction to a single discrete transaction (e.g. Cardozo, 1965; Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). Since the work of Hakansson (1982), research in industrial marketing has emphasized the importance of customer-supplier relationships (see, e.g. Dwyer et al., 1987). As an example, Hakansson (1982, p. 14) states that in industrial marketing settings,

the relationship between buyer and seller is frequently long term, close and involving a complex pattern of interaction between and within each company. The marketers' and buyers' task in this case may have more to do with maintaining these relationships than with making a straightforward sale or purchase.

Against this background, it is obvious that customer satisfaction in industrial marketing should be understood as a *relationship-specific* rather than a *transaction-specific* construct. Thus, our conceptualization of industrial customer satisfaction will be related to different facets of a buyer-supplier relationship. In the terminology of Anderson et al. (1994), this corresponds to the use of a cumulative approach to customer satisfaction measurement. In the following, we will identify potential dimensions of industrial customer satisfaction. Multiple dimensions are an a priori assumption of our study due to the complex nature of industrial marketing relationships.

As a first step, we will briefly review previous studies on *consumer* satisfaction to get first insights into poten-

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