



# The different effect of primary and secondary product attributes on customer satisfaction

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Received 12 November 2004; received in revised form 23 September 2005; accepted 5 October 2005

Available online 27 December 2005

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## Abstract

The different impact of primary and secondary product attributes on customer satisfaction has received little attention. We propose that primary attributes have a greater impact on satisfaction than secondary attributes, and that the relationship between secondary attribute quality and satisfaction is moderated by primary attribute quality. Both hypotheses were supported by the results of a survey of perceived quality and satisfaction with local public transport. Exploratory analyses indicate that the relationship between secondary attributes and customer satisfaction is regressing, and that secondary attributes are more important for frequent users. The results are discussed in relation to theory of attribute searchability.

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*JEL classification:* M31

*PsycINFO classification:* 3900

*Keywords:* Consumer behavior; Customer satisfaction; Product attributes; Service marketing

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## 1. Introduction

In several seminal articles Levitt (1980, 1983) have pointed out the need for marketing professionals to focus on more than the core product in their efforts to achieve success in

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the marketplace. His works on product differentiation (Levitt, 1980) and customer relationships (Levitt, 1983) has influenced disciplines such as product management (e.g., Doyle & Saunders, 1985) and customer relationship management (e.g., Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). Although Levitt (1980) points out that the core product is fundamental for market participation, much research has focused on the impact of non-core features and services on customer value (e.g., Carpenter, Glazer, & Nakamoto, 1994). It has also been hypothesized that non-core aspects are more important than core aspects of the product or service (e.g., Butcher, Sparks, & O'Callaghan, 2003).

Levitt (1980) and others (e.g., Kotler & Armstrong, 2004) suggest a hierarchical relationship between primary (core) and secondary (non-core) product attributes. Although Kotler and Armstrong (2004) propose that secondary attributes merely add to the value of the product, a hierarchical relationship implies that quality of secondary attributes should have little impact on customer satisfaction if quality of primary attributes is poor. This implication has received little attention, with the exception of an experimental study by Iacobucci and Ostrom (1993), and is the main focus of this article. Contrary to the proposition of Butcher et al. (2003), we also expect primary attributes to have stronger impact on customer satisfaction than secondary attributes. In the present research we test these propositions in the context of public transport using survey data from local public transport customers in Norway.

The moderating effect of primary product attributes on the relationship between secondary product attributes and customer satisfaction is especially relevant for the public transport industry and principal-agent relationships in general, where payment for services is increasingly often governed by quality contracts between government agencies (i.e., the principal) and transport companies (i.e., the agent). In cases where payment is in part determined on the basis of customer satisfaction audits, transport companies may find themselves with little control over own financial rewards. Core service aspects, such as routes, schedules, and fares are often determined by the planning authority purchasing the transport services, leaving only secondary service aspects, such as cleaning and maintenance, under the control of the transport companies.

In the marketing literature the distinction between primary and secondary product attributes is well recognized (e.g., Keller, 2003; Kotler & Armstrong, 2004; Rust, Zahorik, & Keiningham, 1996). Primary product attributes are essential in providing a solution to a specific problem the customer seeks to resolve and does often identify an object or an event as a specific product or service. All attributes that are not essential to solve the customer's problem are secondary product attributes. Consider the need to quench your thirst as an example. Attributes that influence the quenching quality of a liquid may be its taste, temperature, thickness, or whether or not it stays in your stomach for a long time or is easily absorbed by your body. The material and design of the container holding the liquid, or a belief about the stereotypical consumer of the brand, may influence the customer's choice of drink, but is not essential to quench your thirst.

In Levitt's (1980) concept of the total product, the product is proposed to consist of four layers (see Fig. 1). At the core of the product is the generic product, which Levitt (1980) describes as fundamental for market participation. The following layers in Levitt's conceptualization are the expected product (features and services expected by the customer), the augmented product (features and services not expected by the customer), and the potential product (e.g., new methods and new ideas). Kotler and Armstrong (2004) suggest that the starting point of product development should be the core benefit that the product will

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