



Complaint as a persuasion attempt: Front line employees' perceptions of complaint legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

Given the rising number of fraudulent returns and illegitimate complaints both in merchandise and service settings, the purpose of this paper is to advance our understanding of such behavior by examining employees' perceptions of complaint legitimacy. Determining complaint authenticity is a crucial step towards detecting fraudulent claims since employees must judge legitimacy of the complaint according to the rationale offered by the customer. This research conceptualizes complaints as an attempt at persuasion by the customer and empirically tests whether persuasion models work in reverse, i.e. where a customer plays no longer a role of a target but rather acts as a message source. The proposed model draws on source, context and receiver factors and findings indicate that the fundamentals of persuasion research are also applicable to complaining episodes. Using survey data collected from the front line hotel employees, customer (customer trustworthiness and attractiveness), situational (severity of service failure), and employee (customer orientation and conflict avoidance) characteristics were found to have an impact on the target's perceptions concerning the cognitive legitimacy of the message itself. In essence, the present study suggests that the employee perception on whether the voiced complaint is legitimate or not go far beyond the actual message itself; rather, employees make their conclusions on complaint legitimacy based on peripheral cues and internal characteristics.

1. Introduction

While the majority of consumer complaints fall into legitimate category and appear reasonable for employees or the firm to adapt the service to address these requests, some complaints may “greatly deviate from the normal service scope and employee expectations” (Wang et al., 2012, p. 69). As Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010) point out, some customers may deliberately take advantage of the firm with an ultimate goal to gain what they can, rather than what they are entitled to.

Investigation of illegitimate complaining as a subsequent form of dysfunctional customer behavior has been largely centered around customer-specific variables such as cheating or the making of unreasonable or fake complaints; researchers have investigated customer personality traits, attitudes toward complaining and cheating (e.g., Kim et al., 2003; Wirtz and Kum, 2004; Reynolds and Harris, 2009; Thøgersen et al., 2009) as well as firm factors such as its redress practices and the size and the length of its relationship with the customers (e.g., Harris and Reynolds, 2003; Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Baker et al., 2012). However, in addition to the organization and the consumer, Langeard et al. (1981) also identify the contact employee

as the main participant in a service encounter. Indeed, the vital role of frontline employees in customer interaction episodes has long been recognized in the marketing literature (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Wang et al., 2012). Furthermore, in order to detect and prevent illegitimate complaints in the future, determining complaint authenticity becomes crucial; in most cases frontline employees are the first ones to encounter a complaining customer, and they must judge the legitimacy of the customer's claim according to the rationale the latter offers (Wang et al., 2012). As such, one of the most important factors in social encounters involving a complaining episode is the complaint recipient's (i.e. frontline employee's) perception of the complaint's legitimacy (Kowalski, 1996). This logic is in line with the traditional communication model (Lasswell, 1948) which includes the source (the complaining customer in this case) that encodes and transmits the message (the complaint) to a receiver (a front line employee) who decodes it and sends feedback (based on the legitimacy perceptions) back to the source in the form of honoring or dismissing the claim. Since persuasion is central to the communication process within the marketing mix context (Van Waterschoot and Van den Bulte, 1992), the present paper conceptualizes complaints as an attempt at persuasion by the customer.

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Thus, the receiver's perception of the message legitimacy becomes crucial.

Although previous studies highlight the importance of legitimacy in the context of product returns in retailing, the construct has been defined and operationalized rather simplistically (e.g., Krapfel, 1988; Autry et al., 2007). For instance, the evaluation of legitimacy perceptions by Resnik and Harmon (1983) was limited to posing a single direct question to the respondents, i.e. whether they believed certain consumer claims to be legitimate or not. The notable exception is the work by Wang et al. (2012) where the authors thoroughly operationalized the construct of complaint legitimacy and explored its impact on the actual employee's behavior in the context of consumer requests for returns. However, research on what shapes the employees' judgments of the complaint's legitimacy is still missing (Baker et al., 2012). As a result, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to the growing body of literature on dysfunctional customer behavior and elucidate a stronger theoretical foundation for the phenomenon of illegitimate complaining behavior by examining factors affecting frontline employees' judgments of the perceived legitimacy of consumer claims. Since the majority of prior research has been focused on retail product returns, this paper extends the extant literature by centering on the phenomenon within service settings.

2. Perceived legitimacy of a complaint in services context

Wang et al. (2012) stress the importance of employee's judgments of a complaint's legitimacy. Front line service representatives come in direct contact with customers and the employees' interpretation of customers' requests along with their interpretation of company policy affect their reactions to consumer complaining. However, previous works on how to handle consumer complaints involving frontline employees were predominantly focused on managerial responses to customer claims (e.g., Resnik and Harmon, 1983), frontline employees' attitudes towards customer service and satisfaction (e.g., Bitner et al., 1994; Susskind et al., 2003) employee adaptiveness (e.g., Gwinner et al., 2005) and the impact of empowerment on frontline service personnel (e.g., Chebat and Kollias, 2000). Furthermore, the scarce empirical works on perceived complaint authenticity were solely focused on product returns leaving service encounters beyond the scope of the extant literature (e.g., Autry et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2012).

Indeed, within the services context, the issue becomes even more complex since the intangibility of services makes it more difficult to specify and adequately contract what is expected (Grønhaug and Gilly, 1991). Furthermore, services may also be more difficult to standardize, and thus more negative deviations from what is expected may occur. As a result, it also becomes more challenging for employees to evaluate the legitimacy of customer complaints and judge whether the request is credible, desirable, and reasonable (Wang et al., 2012). Overall, it is more difficult for a front line employee to assess the legitimacy of a complaint when a customer is demanding a free night at a hotel to make up for the inconvenience suffered due to uncomfortable pillows as opposed to a regular product return, for instance, involving a customer stating that a TV remote is not functional where the legitimacy of the claim can be easily checked on the spot.

According to Meyer and Zucker (1989), legitimacy or authenticity of a complaint represents the extent to which an employee perceives that a customer request has legitimacy across three dimensions: regulative, normative, and cognitive legitimacy (Wang et al., 2012). Regulative legitimacy refers to the conformance of the claim to established organizational complaint handling policies and procedures. Normative legitimacy refers to the perception of whether the voiced complaint is acceptable according to commonly held social values and norms of appropriate behavior and finally, cognitive legitimacy addresses whether the complaint makes sense and whether the claim is appropriate. Ultimately, the employee must assess the cognitive legitimacy of the customer's claim "according to the rationale the customer offers" within

a service setting (Wang et al., 2012, p. 73). Since such evaluation requires an active validation of a complaint by an employee, his/her judgments become critical in evaluating legitimacy. Thus cognitive legitimacy represents the central construct of this study and frontline service representatives remain crucial in evaluating and reacting to fake complaints from the customers.

3. Theoretical background

In many aspects, complaining with the purpose of claiming some form of compensation from the company represents attempts at persuasion on the part of a consumer. Similar to a sales representative trying to close a sale or a marketer attempting to highlight the unique value proposition for a potential consumer, customers need to provide some reasonable and sound argumentation to the service provider as to why the latter should honor the claim and provide patrons with the level of compensation they seek for redress. Thus, in order to provide a thorough organizing framework for understanding an employee's perception of complaint legitimacy, social psychology's treatment of the topic of persuasion attempts and attitude change seems to be relevant in identifying potential antecedents of the proposed construct.

The persuasion literature has long been used by personal sales and consumer behavior researchers (Wood, 2000). The major assumption of this research stream is that a customer generally interprets and copes with marketer's sales presentations and advertising; as such, attitude change theories have been applied to face-to-face buyer-seller dyadic interactions mostly with the customer representing a target exposed to a persuasion attempt, i.e. when the consumer is the recipient of the message delivered by the agent (i.e. the sales people, the front line employees or even brands and slogans representing the message source) (e.g., Kirmani and Campbell, 2004; Ahluwalia, 2000; Ahearne et al., 1999; Laran et al., 2011).

Persuasion literature in the context of bargaining and negotiation has not addressed counter persuasion and has not thoroughly examined the context where the customer represents the message source while seeking to influence a marketer's behavior in various ways (Wood, 2000). However, Friestad and Wright (1994) posit that an individual constantly moves back and forth between the roles of a target and an agent. Their Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) is concerned with how people develop and use persuasion knowledge to cope with persuasion attempts (e.g., marketers' advertising and selling attempts). Interestingly, Friestad and Wright (1994) highlight the generality and flexibility of their conceptual model by pointing out that some consumers may also try to bargain or seek other ways to influence a marketer's behavior. Since people often move rapidly and fluently between the roles of target and agent, it is logical to assume that during the service encounter front line employees may be viewed as targets and a customer claim may be regarded as a persuasion attempt on behalf of a consumer who acts as a message source. Thus, the persuasion literature may be helpful in identifying factors that are particularly important to the effectiveness of persuasion attempts on the part of a consumer.

PKM identifies the target as an individual for whom a persuasion attempt is intended, and the agent is referred to as someone whom a target views being responsible for designing and constructing a persuasion attempt (Friestad and Wright, 1994). Both target and agent possess some degree of contextual topic and persuasion knowledge, as well as knowledge of each other. In a given persuasion episode, which conceptually resembles a customer complaint encounter, persuasion attempt is defined as "a target's perception of an agent's strategic behavior in presenting information designed to influence someone's beliefs, attitudes, decisions, or actions" (Friestad and Wright, 1994, p. 2). It is worth noting that such strategic behavior is not limited to what the agent defines as "the message" but it also includes the target's perceptions of how and why the agent has designed, constructed and delivered the observable message. As such, an actual complaint is a merely

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