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## The impact of pre-existing attitude and conflict management style on customer satisfaction with service recovery

Ebrahim Mazaheri<sup>a,\*</sup>, Debra Z. Basil<sup>b,1</sup>, Venkata Yanamandram<sup>c,2</sup>, Zoltan Daroczi<sup>b,3</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Laurentian University, UPC at Georgian, 1 Georgian Drive, Barrie, Ontario, Canada L4M 3X9

<sup>b</sup> University of Lethbridge, 4401 University Drive, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada T1K 3M4

<sup>c</sup> University of Wollongong, Northfields Ave., Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

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### ABSTRACT

This research examines customer satisfaction with service recovery through the lens of a conflict management framework, specifically assessing the role of pre-existing attitude in determining customer response to service failure. The results of two scenario-based experiments suggest that conflict management style impacts customer satisfaction with service recovery efforts. Additionally, pre-existing attitude toward the company influences the customer's interpretation of a service provider's conflict management style. Those with positive attitudes respond favorably to a cooperative approach in the face of service failures. Conflict management style has little impact on those with negative pre-existing attitudes. A cooperative recovery style and exceeding expectations is necessary to satisfy customers. These results highlight the gravity of service failures, and the importance of proper training in dealing with service recovery.

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### 1. Background to the research

The topics of service failure, complaint-handling and service recovery have attracted significant interest in the marketing literature, and have been argued as critical issues for service managers (Blodgett et al., 1997; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998). A service failure is a situation where a customer perceives a loss arising from deficiencies in service performance that results in dissatisfaction (Hoffman and Bateson, 1997; Johnston, 1995). That is, service failures are instances of conflict situations, and viewed as customers' economic and/or social loss in exchanges (Smith et al., 1999). Customers' complaints at the point of service failure offer service providers opportunities to rectify the problems (Blodgett et al., 1997); poorly handled complaints or recovery may exacerbate the negative effects of the service failure, thus producing a "double deviation" effect in that both the initial events and the complaint-handling attempts are failures (Bitner et al., 1990; Kelley et al., 1993). Overall, poor complaint-handling or service recovery can intensify customer dissatisfaction and may act as a "pushing determinant" in

driving the customer to a competing firm (Bitner et al., 1990; Roos, 1999). Consistent with this perspective, Keaveney (1995) found that service failures and failed recoveries are a leading cause of customer switching behavior in service organizations.

Previous studies have investigated the impact of a proper service recovery on customer satisfaction (Blodgett et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998). Importantly, however, the role of customer pre-existing attitudes toward the service provider is often forgotten in the literature. Pre-existing attitudes can serve as anchors, influencing how new information is processed (Sherif and Hovland, 1961). As customers deal with new information in a service recovery process, their pre-existing attitudes are likely to play a key role in determining the effectiveness of service recovery attempts. Service recovery efforts, in turn, impact on customer satisfaction.

Prior research has addressed the role of previous experience in determining response to service recovery (e.g. Tax et al., 1998). Specifically, positive previous experience mitigates dissatisfaction. The present research seeks to extend this line of inquiry by examining the role of pre-existing attitude rather than simply previous experience. Pre-existing attitudes represent an overall summary evaluation which can be based upon a wide array of information, which may or may not be related to prior experience with the service. As such, pre-existing attitude is a somewhat broader concept than prior experience.

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the moderating effect of customers' pre-existing attitudes on customer satisfaction in a service recovery process. Service recovery is often viewed from the perspective of a justice framework. Within this framework,

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 705 728 1968x1079; fax: +1 705 722 5105.

E-mail addresses: emazaheri@laurentian.ca (E. Mazaheri),

debra.basil@uleth.ca (D.Z. Basil), venkaty@uow.edu.au (V. Yanamandram),

zoltan.daroczi@uleth.ca (Z. Daroczi).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 403 329 2164; fax: +1 403 329 2038.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +61 242213754; fax: +61 242214154.

<sup>3</sup> Tel.: +1 403 329 2069; fax: +1 403 329 2038.

three forms of justice are important: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Tax et al., 1998). This research uniquely contributes to the service recovery literature by applying a conflict management framework in order to further explicate interactional justice. Many service failures result in a form of interpersonal conflict between service workers and customers. In applying a conflict management framework, we acknowledge the inherent interpersonal conflict in such situations. Thus, this paper focuses on interactional justice vis á vis the effect of conflict management style on customer satisfaction following service failure, and the moderating role of pre-existing attitude.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section examines Equity and Justice Theories, which are the dominant frameworks used in service failure research. Following this, Conflict Management Theory is introduced as the lens through which we examine interactional justice. Next we review pre-existing attitudes and their potential impact on information processing. We then review literature regarding satisfaction with service recovery. We subsequently propose hypotheses and test them with two controlled experiments. We conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications and limitations of our findings.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Equity Theory and Justice Theory

Equity Theory is a theory of social justice that explains relational satisfaction, and focuses upon an individual's perceptions of fair distribution of resources with respect to a relationship (Walster et al., 1978). Equity Theory holds that individuals attempt to maximize their rewards in a fair manner; that is, rewards should be distributed according to who provides the most inputs into the dyadic or group system (Adams, 1965).

Equity and Justice Theories have been used to explain customers' reactions to conflict situations (Lind and Tyler, 1988; Goodwin and Ross, 1992). Customers consider a service failure situation as a negative inequity, and attempt to balance equity with post-purchase behavior including complaining (Lapidus and Pinkerton, 1995). Therefore, perceived justice is relevant for explaining customers' behavior in response to complaint-handling (Blodgett et al., 1997).

During a social exchange, an individual compares the ratio of his/her outputs to inputs to the ratio of the other party in the relationship (Walster et al., 1978). Outputs are the perceived positive and negative consequences that an individual receives from a social interaction or exchange, and inputs are the perceived positive and negative contributions to the relational exchange. An individual perceives a situation as equitable when their own ratio of outputs to inputs is the same as those of others with whom they compare themselves. When an individual's output–input ratio is larger than that of the partner, that individual is overbenefited (Sprecher, 1992). Conversely, when an individual experiences a lower output–input ratio when compared with the partner, then that individual is underbenefited (Sprecher, 1992).

However, a limitation with Equity Theory is that it conceptualizes justice only in outcome-oriented terms, which is distributive justice, and neglects interpersonal aspects of the relationship (Austin, 1979; Deutsch, 1975; Leventhal, 1976). Perceptions of justice result not only from evaluation of outcome fairness, but also depend upon the process of attaining justice/fairness, and the manner in which it is implemented (Austin, 1979). In this regard, procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the means by which decisions are made (Lind and Tyler, 1988), while

interactional justice refers to the manner in which an individual is treated throughout the process (Bies and Moag, 1986).

A three-dimensional view of justice has evolved in the marketing literature to include decision outcomes (distributive justice), decision-making procedures (procedural justice) and interpersonal behavior in the delivery of outcomes and enactments of procedures (interactional justice) (Goodwin and Ross, 1992; Tax et al., 1998).

In the present research, we focus specifically on the realm of interactional justice. We seek to enrich our knowledge of this multi-faceted concept by examining it from another perspective; specifically we examine interactional justice through the lens of the conflict management literature.

### 2.2. Satisfaction

Satisfaction has been conceptualized in different ways. The most commonly used approach is the Expectancy Confirmation/Disconfirmation Theory (Bettman, 1986; Myers, 1991; Oliver and Swan, 1989; Tse and Wilton, 1988), where performance is evaluated in light of customer expectations. Woodruff et al. (1983) stated that customers form expectations for the performance of a brand prior to purchase. In general, customers expect service performance to match what they agreed to purchase. If customers do not receive the service they purchased, then the service performance fails to meet expectations. Similarly, if customers receive significantly more than the service they purchased, then the service performance exceeds their expectations. Parasuraman et al. (1988) determined two dimensions based on which customers evaluate a service: outcome and process. In a service failure situation, the outcome of a service recovery process can be considered to be the service outcome or performance and the representative's style of conflict management can be considered to be the service recovery process. In other words, meeting the customer's expectation means providing the service level that the customer expected to receive beforehand. Satisfaction with complaint-handling is a key variable that links perceptions of the fairness dimensions to post-complaint attitudes and behaviors. Some complaint-handling/service recovery studies have considered satisfaction with a particular complaint-handling or recovery experience (Tax et al., 1998; Smith et al., 1999). Others have considered overall satisfaction after the complaints, or satisfaction with overall service performance after recovery, in addition to, or without, satisfaction with a particular complaint-handling or recovery experience (Homburg and Furst, 2005; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003; McCollough et al., 2000). A common theme in the various studies of complaint-handling/service recovery is that customers must be satisfied with the firm's complaint-handling or recovery efforts. In this study, we focus on satisfaction with a particular recovery process, which is the employee's conflict management style. Not surprisingly, customers are expected to be more satisfied when the perceived service exceeds their expectations, compared to just meeting or failing to meet expectations (Rust and Oliver, 2000; Westbrook and Oliver, 1981). This hypothesis aims to test the validity of previous findings in our empirical setting.

**H1.** Customer satisfaction with the recovery efforts is higher when the firm's performance exceeds customers' expectations than when firm performance falls below customer expectations.

### 2.3. Conflict management style

A service failure occurs when a customer has not received what he or she should have received. This can be viewed as a conflict according to Deutsch (1973), who defines conflict as incompatible activities by two parties. In line with Deutsch (1973), Tjosvold (1986) states

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