

Consumer Complaining Intentions: An Antecedent to Consumerism

Venu Thyagarajan and Ali Khatibi

INTRODUCTION

Consumerism is an outcome of sufferings and exploitation of the consumers by market forces. Technological innovations have brought about a revolution in every sector creating a variety of products. It is a challenge to the consumer to purchase the products when he enters into the market (Bhutt, 1995). Therefore it is necessary for the consumers to be aware of their legitimate rights during and after purchases.

The major bottleneck in the growth of the consumer movement is the mental attitude and apathy on the part of the consumer himself. He is not willing to fight for his rights but expects the various consumer guidance societies to do the that work for him. In the event of problems the consumers have to take actions. These actions may be in the form of writing a strongly worded letter once or twice, following it up with the dealer (Sinha, 1990). While mentioning about the Indian consumer by a consumer activist he aptly puts, "the Indian consumer's blood has become so weak and diluted that it refuses to boil at any temperature" (Grant, 1990). He portrays the typical Indian consumer as the one who is having the habit to grumble but reluctance to take action.

There are two factors that hinder the consumers from complaining to the organization. First, it is difficult because one's culture does not encourage being a whiner. Secondly, employees do not encourage it because they consider it as a personal attack on their self esteem. Nevertheless, when companies invest money on units that handle complaints and inquiries, the average return is over 100 per cent for the producers of certain consumer durables. In an endeavor to understand the individual's inborn qualities as a consumer, the studies on consumer complaining intention provides a better scope to identify his complaining attitude as an individual consumer and also as a member of the society. This also helps the individual consumer and also to the government and various agencies to promote the consumerism in

right direction. In addition, it enlightens the consumers on various avenues available to ventilate their grievances and get redressal of their complaints.

CONSUMER COMPLAINING INTENTIONS

The study of consumer complaining intentions and its corresponding Consumer complaining behaviour (CCB) has received increasing attention in the last 10 years from researchers and practitioners. Marketing practitioners find these CCB constructs useful in understanding the extent of marketplace dissatisfaction and in devising programmes to reduce consumer complaints. The study of CCB and its consequences appears to be critical in the explanations and prediction of consumer repurchase intentions and brand loyalty (Marsha, 1983). Further, in terms of macro-marketing, the nature and extent of CCB prevalent in an industry seem to affect the consumer and social welfare and hence provides the way for good consumer activist groups. Karen Singer quantifies the importance of complaining behaviour. "A customer who complains and if satisfied will tell eight people; but if the experience is negative twice as many people will be told" (Singer, 1987).

Despite the obvious importance of the CCB concept, its development has been minimal. A redressal need is a post purchase complaint situation requiring some form of compensation or satisfaction. Such needs can be caused by (a) when product and services fail to live upto the consumer expectations (b) perform poorly or break (c) result in personal injury or property damage (d) not adequately covered by service or warranties. Such redressal need can be made available from the manufacturers or retail stores or can also be stimulated by peer groups. This in turn promotes consumerism among the public or consumers. Landon's observation about the antecedents / consequences of CCB would be more useful for issues relating to CCB definition. Such as, tax-

nomy, and dimension could be thoroughly addressed (Landon Jr., 1980). Some attempts have been made in this direction. The research work existing in this field were examined in the following pages.

AREVIEW OF THE CCB CONCEPT

Though several definitions have been proposed about CCB, there is considerable agreement about the conceptual meaning of the consumer complaint behaviour construct. First, the CCB phenomenon is believed to be triggered by some feeling or emotions of perceived dissatisfaction by Day and Landon (Day, 1984). Without the perception of dissatisfaction consumers' responses cannot qualify as CCB. Second, CCB responses are generally considered to fit into two broad categories, behavioural and non behavioural. Behavioural responses, which focus on complaint behaviour studies constitute any or all consumer actions that convey an "expression of dissatisfaction". Conceptually, these responses need not be limited to those directed towards the seller (manufactures, retailer etc.,). Behaviours involving third parties or even friends and relatives (e.g. negative word of mouth communication) are also regarded as being in the category of behavioural responses. Day and his associates contend that nonbehavioural responses, such as when the consumer forgets about a dissatisfaction episode and does nothing should also be considered as a legitimate CCB response. To that extent, some people choose behavioural responses whereas others select non behavioural responses in relatively similar dissatisfying episodes. The inclusion of non behavioural responses appears to be not only justified but necessary to understand the process of CCB response.

CCB is conceptualised as a set of multiple (Behavioural and non behavioural) responses, some or all of which are triggered by a perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase episode. This multiplicity raises questions about the dimensionality of the CCB concept. At the two extremes are the possibility of unidimensional or an n-dimensional (where n are all possible CCB actions) taxonomy for CCB responses. The following section addresses this issue.

CLASSIFICATION ISSUES

A review of the CCB literature shows two major attempts to address taxonomical issues related to the CCB construct. In the first attempt, Day and Landon proposed a two level hierarchical classification scheme (Day and Landon Jr., 1977). The first level distinguishes behavioural (i.e. action) from non behavioural (i.e. no action) responses. The second level represents the distinction between public and private action. Public actions include seeking redress or refund from the seller, complaining to the consumer organisation, and taking legal actions. Some typical examples of private actions are word-of-mouth communication to friends and relatives and ceasing to patronize a store. Day and Landon seem to justify the public/private dichotomy on the grounds of the nature and importance of the product involved in dissatisfaction. For complex and expensive products (e.g. durable goods) consumers are expected to engage more often in public actions. In such a situation, "the chances that the consumer will do nothing at all or take only private actions are lower but still appear to be substantial".*

Empirical studies for the validity of the preceding distinction is limited. For instance, Day and Ash report some typical findings of complaint behaviours in the case of non durable goods. After dissatisfaction with durable goods, 32.5% of the respondents reported warning family and friends (i.e. private action). For nondurable goods, the comparable value was reported to be 33.3%. In contrast, the percentage of respondents who complained to the seller for a replacement or a refund (i.e. public action) was 48.8% and 57.9% for durable and nondurable goods respectively. The product complexity increased (durable and nondurable, the extent of private actions remained about the same but public actions actually decreased (Day and Ash, 1979).

In another study Day suggests another basis for the classification of the second level of 'Day and Landon's taxonomy'. He notes that consumer complain (or do not complain) to achieve specific objectives. In fact, consumers can provide various explanations for their complaint actions. Day proposes that the "purpose" of complaining can

be used to classify behavioural CCB into three broad categories.

Redress seeking: The motive is to seek specific remedy either directly or indirectly from the seller (e.g. complain to the manufacturers, take legal action etc.)

Complaining: The motive is to communicate dissatisfaction for reasons other than seeking remedy (e.g. to affect future behaviour, to persuade others by word of mouth communication etc.)

Personal boycott: The motive is to discontinue purchase of the offending service (including the product, brand, store and/or manufacturer).

OPERATIONALISATION ISSUES

Research attempts to operationalise CCB explicitly as a construct is limited. The inception of research in the field of operationalisation of CCB as a construct was initiated by Day and his colleagues. They suggest a nine item operationalisation of CCB. But any of its psychometric properties regarding reliability and validity such as alpha reliability, dimensions etc. are not reported. Even without its reliability and validity, these researchers use these constructs to identifying the Consumer Complaint intentions. Bearden and Teel (1983) are the first and the most prominent among the researchers to view CCB explicitly as a construct. They proposed a five item CCB construct as an operationalisation. These five intentions include: 1. Warned the Family and Friends, 2. Returned the Product for rework, 3. Contacted the Manufacturer, 3. Contacted the Consumer Associations and 5. Took some legal actions. These five CCB intentions are given in Guttman scale and reported some psychometric properties also. These items are given in that order so as to reflect the increasing "intensity of complaints" and the respondents are requested to identify the intentions. The data collected by Bearden and Teel on a five item CCB scale have coefficients of reproducibility and scalability of 0.98 and 0.79 respectively.

Several issues can be raised about the Guttman operationalisation. First, non behavioural responses of doing nothing is not included in the above model. This particular operationalisation does not include such responses in the CCB construct. Further, the other classification scheme provided by Day and Landon involves both two

dimensional(public vs private actions) and three dimensional (redress, complaint and boycott) conceptualisation. In the proposed five item operationalisation, private actions are measured by a single item and the other four items appear to tap the public action of CCB. To that extent, that single construct does not provide adequate measurements (Nunnally, 1978).

In an endeavour to provide a better classification scheme of CCB construct, Jagdip Singh provides a ten CCB Construct. The ten CCB construct include: 1. Forget about the incident and do nothing. 2. Definitely complain to the manager next time. 3. Decide not to use the shop again. 4. Go to the shop immediately and ask them to attend the problem immediately. 5. Speak to friends and relatives about the bad experience. 6. Convince the friends and relatives not to use the shop again. 7. Complain to the consumer associations. 8. Write a letter to the local newspaper about the bad experience. 9. Report to the consumer agencies so that they can warn other consumers. and 10. Take some legal actions against the shop / manufacturer. The findings of the above research is advantageous to operationalise the CCB intentions in a better manner.

CONCLUSION

The process by which the consumer determines what he will do after experiencing dissatisfaction is extremely complex and cannot be adequately described by any simple model. However, reasonable approach such as breaking the process down into its three major components should be helpful in understanding the CCB concept in a better manner. These components include factors controlled or primarily influenced by consumer related factors, circumstantial or environmental factors that are in a sense independent of the marketing and consumer factors. The skills of the individual consumer are significant in determining how he or she reacts to an unsatisfactory experience. The influence of personality plays a vital role in the complaining behaviour of the consumers. As a primary group, the family is perhaps the ultimate face to face interaction with the customers. From the individual consumer's point of view, family members must satisfy their unique and joint consumption needs. As a consequence of these and other factors, family influence

nce may also affects the individual personality characteristics, attitudes, evaluative criteria and consumption pattern. These influences in turn change the consumer complaining behaviour. These differing dimensions of Consumer Complaining Behaviour direct most of the multinational companies to invest millions of dollars in different means to improve complaint handling. Such complaint management programmes which may include, toll-free system of communications for complaints, intensive staff training, liberal refund policies and even booths where irate customers can complain on videotapes (Sellers, 1988).

KEY WORDS Consumer Dissatisfaction. Consumerism. CCB.

ABSTRACT The post purchase evaluation process of consumers can produce satisfaction or dissatisfaction as outcomes. The presence of dissatisfaction has many implication in marketing strategies and it further gives rise to consumerism as movement. Consumer Complain Intention was identified as a catalyst for consumerism. Many organisation started investing huge amounts to handle this consumer complain in an effective way. The return in handling complaints or inquiries will produce high rate of return. There are some factors that hinders the consumers for complaining to the organisations. Firstly, it is difficult because of one's culture does not encourage being a whiner. Secondly, employees does not encourage it because they consider it as a personal attack on their self esteem. The present paper critically analyse the concept of consumer complain behaviour (CCB) and also it tries to operationalise the issues of CCB.

Authors' Addresses: Venu Thyagarajan, Faculty of Management, Multimedia University, 63100, Cyberjaya, Selangor DE, Malaysia
E-mail: venuthyagarajan@mmu.edu.my
 Ali Khatibi, Associate Dean, Faculty of Management, Multimedia University, 63100, Cyberjaya, Selangor DE, Malaysia
Fax: +603 - 8312 5590
E-mail: alikhatibi@mmu.edu.my

REFERENCES

- Bearden, William and Teel, Jessee E.: Selected determinants of consumer satisfaction and complaint reports, *Journal of Marketing Research*, **20**: 21-28 (1983).
- Bhatt, G.R.: Consumerism concept and its need in our Era. *Indian Journal of Marketing*, **15 (10)**: 3-8 (1995).
- Day, Ralph L.: Modelling choices among alternative responses to dissatisfaction. *Advances in Consumer Research*, **11**: 496-499 (1984).
- Day, Ralph L. and Ash, Stephen: Consumer responses to dissatisfaction with durable products. *Advances in Consumer Research*, **20**: 21-28 (1983).
- Day, Ralph. L. Landon, Jr. and Laird E.: Towards a theory of Consumer complaining behaviour. In: *Consumer and Industrial Buying Behaviour*, Arch Woodside, Jagdish Sheth, and Peter Bennett, (Eds.) North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam. pp. 425-437 (1977).
- Grant, N.B.: An appeal to consumer. *Maharashtra Business Herald*, Vol. **1**: March 29 (1990).
- Landon, Jr. and Laird E.: The direction of consumer complaint research. *Advances in Consumer Research*, **7**: 335-338 (1980).
- Marsha, Richins: Negative word of mouth by dissatisfied customers: A pilot study. *Journal of Marketing*, **47**: 86-97 (1983).
- Nunnally, Jum C.: *Psychometric Theory*, McGraw Hill Book Co., New York (1978).
- Sellers, Patrica: How to Handle customers' Gripes. *Fortune*, October **24**: 89 (1988).
- Singer, Karen: Marketing's new watchword: Satisfaction guaranteed. *Adweek's Marketing Week*, Nov.2, **59**: (1987).
- Sinha, Sanjay: Consumers: learn to complain! *Maharashtra Business Herald*, Vol.1 **(46)**: Sept.27 (1990).