

# COMPLAINING, COMPLIMENTING AND NO-RESPONSE: CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

Emerging research in services and relationship marketing has provided conclusive evidence that, as far as consumer—provider exchanges are concerned, what happens after a purchase is as, if not more, important than what occurs before purchase. This paper focuses on a range of post-purchase responses including complaining, complimenting, and no-response (CCN). Researchers and practitioners have studied these responses to understand their consumers and create programs for successful recovery of dissatisfied consumers (Schibrowsky and Lapidus 1994), to compare the costs of recovering complaining consumers with attracting new consumers (Rust and Zahorik 1993), and to examine the links between effective customer satisfaction, trust loyalty and commitment (Tax, et al. 1998). Although these CCN responses have often been examined separately in the past literature (Stewart's 1998 study of exit, Singh and Wilkes's 1996 study of complaint responses), the present state of literature on CCN is rather fragmented and a systematic and integrative consideration of the entire range of post-purchase responses is absent in literature.

This paper aims to fill the preceding gap by providing a critical review of the literature on CCN by using a "What-How-Why" framework to analyze previous empirical studies. The "what" of consumer post purchase responses includes all descriptive efforts (e.g., taxonomies, variability in CCN, cultural comparisons) to understand what consumers do following a purchase/consumption experience; while "how" indicates process models (expectation-disconfirmation, attitudes, attributions, and expectancy values) utilized to describe the antecedents and processes of how consumers arrive at these responses. Finally, "why" consumers indulge in CCN provides insights into the underlying goals (e.g., financial redress, maintain fairness, revenge) that motivate these responses and the level of investigation. The level indicates the hierarchical position at which the goals are perceived to exist and constitute three hierarchical positions of program, principle and system goals (Carver and Scheier 1982, 1990).

System goals are global ideas of the idealized self that are abstract and difficult to define. The output of this level consists of providing guiding principles for subsequent response(s). Principles are not specifications for acts but qualities that can manifest in many acts. The

concrete activities that most people clearly recognize as "behaviors" are termed as programs (Carver and Scheier 1990). Based on our review (provided in a convenient tabular form), we suggest that most empirical studies have ignored the underlying psychological motivations for CCN responses and have concentrated only on the program level goals. Focus on higher level goals (principle and system) is likely to unearth deeper insights into the choices of the particular CCN responses/response categories.

Suggestions for future research efforts include examining the dynamic nature of CCN in terms of mapping patterns of multiplicity and simultaneity of CCN responses and understanding key sources of variations across consumers and industries. The notion of dynamism is that consumers continually evaluate possible combinations of CCN responses from their repertoire and decide to engage, disengage or continue CCN responses and the result is likely to be a complex, dynamic pattern of engagement and disengagement. The use of control process theory (Carver and Scheier 1982, 1990) with its focus in hierarchical goal achievement and feedback loops will provide a theoretical framework for this dynamic adjustment of behavior.

Second, understanding CCN processes and explaining consumer post-purchase response failures would include the use of action identification theory (Vallacher and Wegner 1987, 1989) and limited self-regulation strength (Muraven, et al. 1998). Action identification supposes that different responses of consumers have different identities ranging from low-level identities that specify how the response was performed to high-level identities that signify why the response was performed. Implicitly, past studies have utilized lower level identities as the working hypotheses for the study of CCN responses and understanding how action identification at different identity levels results in patterns of CCN responses would involve drawing on the theory of self-regulation strength as a limited resource. It is implied that consumers' pursuit of CCN responses is constrained by the inclination to conserve self-regulation strength and the degree of strength allocated to a CCN response is a function of its identity level.

Third, it is suggested that future researchers enumerate system (super-ordinate) goals that drive CCN responses, which would involve extracting the interper-

sonal and intrapsychic functions of CCN responses. The use of a means-end framework (Gutman 1982, 1997) where the means are the various CCN responses and the ends are system goals such as self esteem, security, equity etc., that are organized in some hierarchical manner with specified linkages. Opportunities exist to identify commonalities across segments of consumers and insights into existing typology of complainers (Singh 1990).

Consumer affect following goal attainment via CCN responses need to be investigated which should involve both the attainment status of the goal (success or failure) and the dynamic concept of speed (rate) of goal achieve-

ment (Carver and Scheier 1990). A framework for exploring the potential influences of response speed and CCN response category on CCN related affect and related hypotheses is offered as another avenue for future research.

Finally, it is suggested that future research should aim at developing a unified conceptual model that can tie together disparate aspects of CCN (e.g., model that examines both complaining and complimenting responses simultaneously). A "threshold framework" is offered as a starting point, which involves multiple thresholds for both the CCN response categories and responses.

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