

*Customer Service versus Word-of-Mouth:
An Exploratory Motivational Analysis of Online Complainants*

Todd J. Bacile, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Marketing and
The Clifton A. Morvant Distinguished Professor in Business
Joseph A. Butt, S.J., College of Business
Loyola University New Orleans
6363 St. Charles Ave.
New Orleans, LA 70118
tjbacile@loyno.edu

Alexa K. Fox
Assistant Professor of Marketing
Department of Marketing
College of Business
Copeland Hall
Ohio University
Athens, OH 45701
foxa2@ohio.edu

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the Direct Marketing Policy Center, which is housed within the Carl H. Linder College of Business at the University of Cincinnati. This research was partially funded by a grant from the Direct Marketing Policy Center.

The Problem

Consumers' motivations are well understood when communicating online complaints on a website that an offending firm does not own or manage, such as an online review site. However, less is known about consumers' motivations to complain on a firm-managed site, such as a company's Facebook page or Twitter profile. This paper fills this void by identifying consumers' motivations for sharing complaints on a firm-managed site versus a non-firm-managed site. The research questions (RQs) driving this investigation are:

RQ1: What are consumers' motivations for sharing complaints on a firm-managed social media page?

RQ2: How do these motivations differ from other online complaint channels that are not managed by firms, such as an online review site?

The Methodology

The phenomenological interviewing qualitative method is used to answer these questions. Twenty-eight consumers participated in one-on-one interviews. Online ads and announcements on social media were posted requesting participants for a marketing study. Subjects were screened using two criteria. First, each must have shared a complaint on an online review site. Second, each must have shared a complaint on a firm's social media page. Respondents meeting these criteria had actual experience of complaining on both non-firm-managed and firm-managed sites, thus meeting the lived experiences requirement of phenomenology (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). The interviews typically lasted 30 to 60 minutes.

Nvivo 10 served as the analysis software. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The transcribed files included over 500 pages of raw data, which served as the data source in Nvivo. All data were analyzed, coded, and interpreted based on the four steps of the

phenomenology approach (Moustakas 1994). This led to building themes in the data. Validation of the data used multiple methods recommended for qualitative data validation (Patton 2002).

Results and Proposed Contributions to Direct / Interactive marketing

The results from Study 1 answer the research questions by identifying consumers' primary motivations for posting online complaints on firm-managed social media pages as (1) the desire to speak with the firm, (2) to seek problem resolution, and (3) to maintain the customer-company relationship. These are not primary motivations for consumers to complain on non-firm-managed sites, largely due to the perception of a firm's control or lack thereof. The results further suggest that modern-day consumers use social media frequently, which makes it more convenient to complain to a firm as compared to calling a company, e-mailing a company, or physically visiting a store to complain. The authors' perception gained from the motivational themes is that firm-managed social media pages are an additional customer service touch-point. This is a new form of a customer service venue that researchers do not fully understand.

Contributions of this research pertain to the merging of service-related theory with interactive online media. Whereas service recovery literature focuses on a dyad of a customer and a firm's service rep (Solomon et al. 1985), a customer service venue on a firm's social media page creates an increase in the visibility to and participation by fellow consumers. Expanding the service dyad to include additional active participants creates a unique service environment unlike any other. This new type of service environment may necessitate the consumer complaining behavior framework (Singh 1988) and perceptions of justice (Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998) to be re-considered in a service environment available to the masses in online media.

References available on request.