

Research in Brief

Post-Purchase Consumer Processes and the Complaining Consumer

MARY C. GILLY
BETSY D. GELB*

This paper addresses the issue of post-purchase processes of consumers who complain about purchase experiences. Hypotheses about complaining consumers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with organizational response and their subsequent repurchase behavior are proposed and empirically tested using data from consumers who complained to a major oil company.

A growing body of literature in psychology and marketing has examined consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction after purchase. Other literature, much of it managerial in orientation, has focused on one outcome of consumer dissatisfaction: complaint behavior. This paper attempts to incorporate both of these post-purchase areas by examining the attitudes and behavior of complaining consumers following organizational response to complaints. A study was conducted to test hypothesized links between:

1. The nature of a complaint and the complainant's satisfaction with the organizational response to it,
2. The nature of the response and the complainant's satisfaction, and
3. Satisfaction with the complaint response and subsequent repurchase.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Post-purchase behavior is viewed in this study as a series of steps in which consumers compare their expectations to perceived reality, experience consequent satisfaction/dis-

satisfaction, and then act in a way influenced by that satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Andreasen 1976; Gilly 1979). If the result of the expectations-performance comparison process is dissatisfaction, the consumer may decide to complain, based on expectations about what the complaint will achieve (Kraft 1977; Landon 1977). The response of the organization to the complaint will then be evaluated in light of those expectations, resulting in a degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the complaint response. Thus, the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the complaint response combines with previous satisfaction/dissatisfaction concerning the product to produce some final consumer degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the total purchase outcome. Since overall post-purchase feelings affect repurchase behavior (Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat 1978), some relationship can be expected between feelings about complaint response and likelihood of repurchase.

The paradigm presented and tested here is, overall, a special case of the idea that expectations and the degree to which they are met influence satisfaction/dissatisfaction. A considerable body of literature has developed in this area, and while different studies have led to different conclusions, each has found some link between the variables. Guzzo (1980) characterizes the broad paradigm as "discrepancy theory." He notes that each of its variations has empirical support, but no one variation dominates as an explanation of the dynamics of consumer satisfaction. Each, however, views satisfaction/dissatisfaction as a function of the degree of discrepancy between expectations and actual results.

*Mary C. Gilly is Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Management, University of California, Irvine, CA 92717. Betsy D. Gelb is Associate Professor, Department of Marketing, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77004.

Spector's work (1956) supported "contrast" theory—the idea that a sufficiently large difference between expectation and performance leads the consumer to magnify that gap due to the surprise effect of encountering the unexpected difference. Cardozo (1965) also found expectations relevant in a study supporting contrast theory where a low level of purchase effort was required. Olshavsky and Miller (1972), however, concluded that a difference between expectation and results is narrowed by the consumer, or assimilated to reduce dissonance (Festinger 1957).

Other theories concerning the expectations–performance comparison process predict: (1) that any disconfirmation of the expected result will be perceived as less satisfying than confirmation (generalized negativity), and (2) that performance differing only slightly from expectations tends to result in the displacement of product perceptions toward expectations (assimilation) while large variances tend to be exaggerated (contrast; Anderson 1963). These four major theories share the common element of linking the expectation–results comparison to satisfaction.

Further support for the relationship is offered by the work of Swan and Trawick (1979), who conceptualized two types of expectations: desired (what performance should be) and predictive (what performance will be). They found that confirmation of desired expectations resulted in satisfaction, while confirmation of predictive expectations resulted in indifference. Westbrook (1980) also found that satisfaction was related to expectations being met or exceeded for both of the two product categories he tested.

The basis for the present study is this overall discrepancy theory. This foundation is only relevant, however, if discrepancies do in fact exist between what complaining consumers expect from the complaining process and what they then receive.

There is evidence of such discrepancies in the literature—evidence that the expectations of complaining consumers are important and often not met. Kendall and Russ (1975) found considerable variation in organizational responses to complaints, even within a single industry. Resnik, Gnauck, and Aldrich (1977) concluded that corporate responses to complainers resulted in a disturbingly low rate of satisfaction with the response given. Other writers have implicitly recognized a gap between what organizations do and what their complainants expect; they have offered suggestions to bring the two closer together (Brock 1974; Fennessy 1972).

These authors and others interested in organizational complaint-response policies and practices appear to be making the assumption that marketing consequences may flow from consumers' reactions to the way their complaints are handled. Such an assumption fits comfortably into consumer behavior models (e.g., Engel, Blackwell, and Kollat 1978; Howard and Sheth 1969; Nicosia 1966) which show post-purchase behavior as one factor affecting subsequent repurchase. In one study based on this assumed relationship between satisfaction and repurchase, Swan (1977) found that satisfaction with a store influenced post-shopping attitudes, which in turn influenced intentions to shop again.

HYPOTHESES

The present study tested six hypotheses, all suggested by the literature just cited. Two concerned the effect of pre-complaint expectations on satisfaction with organization response; two concerned the effect of the organization's response on satisfaction; and two concerned the effect of satisfaction with organizational response on repurchase behavior.

H1: Responses to complaints that do not involve monetary loss will bring about lower levels of satisfaction than responses to complaints which do involve monetary loss.

This hypothesis is based on the satisfaction literature concerned with the comparison process involving expectations and actual results (Anderson 1973; Andreassen 1976; Gilly 1979; Oliver 1977; Swan 1977; Westbrook 1980). Those consumers who complain about losing money know what they expect and communicate it: they want their money back. Consumers complaining about nonmonetary loss problems presumably have expectations which, because they are less definite, will be less likely to be matched by results.

H2: The higher the loss claimed in the complaint, the lower the degree of satisfaction with organization responses.

Like the first hypothesis, this hypothesis is based on the expectations–results comparison literature. Landon (1977) suggested that the seriousness of the complaint is one factor the dissatisfied consumer considers when deciding to complain. The amount of loss claimed offers one objective measure of the problem's seriousness. It is assumed that a higher loss will set the complainant's expectation level higher; therefore, there would be a lower probability that the expectation would be met.

H3: The higher the percentage of monetary loss reimbursed, the greater the degree of satisfaction with complaint response.

This hypothesis most clearly operationalizes the link between the expectations–results comparison process and satisfaction. The reported loss operationalizes "desired" expectation (following Swan and Trawick 1979), and the repayment proportion operationalizes "outcome."

H4: The more quickly a complaint is resolved, the greater the satisfaction.

Speed is an important aspect of the company's response mentioned by several authors (Brock 1974; Fennessy 1972) in the prescriptions for handling complaints. As with H3, prompt response is the "desired" expectation, and thus its comparison to actual outcome is expected to be associated with degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

H5: The higher the degree of satisfaction with organization complaint response, the greater the likelihood of brand repurchase.

TABLE 1
 SATISFACTION WITH ORGANIZATION RESPONSE EXPRESSED BY COMPLAINANTS
 WITH MONETARY AND NONMONETARY PROBLEMS

	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Total
Complainants with nonmonetary problems	33%	17%	14%	36%	100%
Complainants with monetary loss problems	64%	15%	6%	15%	100%

NOTE: $\chi^2 = 49.27, 3 df, p < 0.001$

H6: The higher the degree of satisfaction with complaint response, the greater the increase (or the smaller the decrease) in level of brand repurchase.

The relationships suggested by these two hypotheses are predicted by consistency theory (Festinger 1957). Only if the complainer is satisfied with the company's response to his or her complaint can repurchase from that company be consistent with attitude. Otherwise there are two inconsistent ideas operating: "I am supporting this company," but "they treated me in an unsatisfactory fashion." While attitude change is one possible response to such an inconsistency, the response hypothesized here is to repurchase the brand either not at all or else at a degree below previous purchase level.

METHOD

Subjects for the research were 521 consumers who complained to a major oil company. They were respondents from a stratified random sample of 964 complainants who were mailed questionnaires from the company. Stratification was based on seriousness of complaint. The sampled population consisted of all individuals whose complaint files were closed during a two-month period (October 1 to November 30). Half of the sample was taken from ten problem categories the company viewed as more "serious" due to their frequency and/or the tendency of complainants experiencing these problems to lose money. The other half was drawn from all other problem categories.

The questionnaires requested complainants' degree of satisfaction with the company's complaint response. For most complainants, the complaint files provided the amount of loss claimed and the response time (the number of days from the date the complaint was received to the date the complaint file was closed). In some files, however, amount of loss claimed was not recorded; for these respondents no assumptions could be made about whether or not they had complained about a loss with monetary consequences or had made a nonmonetary complaint.

Credit card records were the source of information about prior purchase level (median monthly purchase, in dollars, for the six-month period prior to the date the complaint was

received) and repurchase level (the same measure for the period six months following complaint resolution). They were available for 198 complainers who had credit cards from this company. Records were not used during the period between receipt of the complaint and its resolution. Median monthly purchase levels were used so that one large purchase (e.g., tires) would not unduly affect comparisons.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Responses to complaints that do not involve monetary loss will bring about lower levels of satisfaction than responses to complaints which do involve monetary loss.

To test the first hypothesis, data from two groups of complainants were examined: those who claimed monetary losses such as "bad gas" or faulty tires (218), and those who expressed unhappiness of some kind but did not claim loss of money, such as dirty restroom complaints (224). These two groups of complainers were compared on the variable of degree of satisfaction with organizational response, which was measured on a four-point scale. Complainers who claimed monetary losses differed significantly from those who had nonmonetary problems with respect to degree of satisfaction with the company's complaint responses. As shown in Table 1, the majority (79 percent) of the 218 respondents claiming monetary losses were satisfied with the organization's responses, whereas the 224 respondents who made no claims of monetary loss were split about 50-50 with respect to satisfaction and dissatisfaction ($p < 0.001$). Thus analyses to test other hypotheses were performed separately for those who claimed monetary losses and those who did not, since the two groups appeared to represent different populations.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the loss claimed in the complaint, the lower the degree of satisfaction with organization response.

The second hypothesis was not supported. The nonparametric Spearman rank correlation was used to test the hypothesized association between degree of satisfaction with complaint response and the amount of loss claimed. As

TABLE 2

SPEARMAN CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS RELATING THREE VARIABLES TO SATISFACTION WITH RESPONSE^a

Satisfaction with response	Variables in complaint and response		
	Amount claimed (monetary loss problems)	Percent received (monetary loss problems)	Number of days until complaint resolution
All complaints	.01 (218)	.41 ^b (218)	-.09 ^c (510)
Complainants with monetary loss problems			
Complainants with credit cards	.10 (79)	.36 ^b (79)	.16 (78)
Complainants without credit cards	-.03 (139)	.44 ^b (139)	-.02 (138)
Complainants with nonmonetary problems			
Complainants with credit cards	n/a	n/a	-.37 ^b (118)
Complainants without credit cards	n/a	n/a	-.03 (176)

^an given in parentheses^bp < 0.001^cp < 0.05

shown in Table 2, the correlation coefficient of 0.01 was not significantly different from zero.

Hypothesis 3: The higher the percentage of monetary loss reimbursed, the greater the degree of satisfaction with complaint response.

This hypothesis was supported by the data. For complainants experiencing problems involving monetary losses, degree of satisfaction with the company's responses was significantly related to the percent of loss repaid by the company.

Hypothesis 4: The more quickly a complaint is resolved, the greater the satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4 was supported for complainants with credit cards who had problems not involving monetary losses. When a credit card holder complained about a nonmonetary problem, the more quickly the problem was resolved, the greater the satisfaction. When a monetary loss was involved, or when the consumer did not have a credit card, satisfaction with the organization's response was not significantly related to the length of time required to resolve the complaint (Table 2).

TABLE 3

PROPORTION OF REPURCHASERS AT EACH SATISFACTION LEVEL

Self-reported satisfaction with complaint response	Repurchase (percent)	No repurchase (percent)	Total	
			percent	n
Very satisfied	86	14	100	93
Somewhat satisfied	90	10	100	41
Somewhat dissatisfied	74	26	100	19
Very dissatisfied	62	38	100	45

NOTE: $\chi^2 = 13.41$, 3 df, $p < 0.01$.

Hypothesis 5: The higher the degree of satisfaction with organization complaint response, the greater the likelihood of brand repurchase.

The fifth hypothesis was supported by data from the 198 respondents for whom credit card data were available. About 80 percent of these respondents did show a repurchase on the credit card during the six months following the complaint response. However, the range was from 90 percent to 62 percent, depending on the category representing degree of satisfaction with complaint response. Table 3 shows the results of Chi-square analysis.

Hypothesis 6: The higher the degree of satisfaction with complaint response, the greater the increase (or the smaller the decrease) in level of brand repurchase.

This hypothesis was partially supported. Complainants at each level of satisfaction reduced their purchase levels following the complaining experience. A median test was performed to compare, for each pair of categories, the number of cases above and below the median change in purchase levels. Table 4 shows the median tests that resulted in significant differences. Complainants who were very dissatisfied with organizational response showed significantly greater reductions than those who were either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied. There were no significant differences in change of purchase levels between "very satisfied," "somewhat satisfied," and "somewhat dissatisfied" complainants, or between the two groups of dissatisfied complainants.

DISCUSSION

Limitations of this study should be acknowledged here. Self-reported data provide the measure of satisfaction, and were gathered only regarding one company's actions, at one point in time, separated perhaps by weeks from the closing of a complaint file. Thus, the relationship between satisfaction and repurchase need not flow only in hypothesized directions. Some respondents may have repurchased, found the experience satisfying (or not satisfying), and been influenced by that degree of satisfaction when they responded to the questionnaire concerning their reaction to

TABLE 4

MEDIAN TESTS COMPARING SATISFACTION PAIRS ON THE VARIABLE OF CHANGE IN PURCHASE LEVELS^a

	Very satisfied (percent)	Very dissatisfied (percent)	Total	
			percent	n
Above median ^b	76	24	100	67
Below median ^b	59	41	100	71
	Somewhat satisfied (percent)	Very dissatisfied (percent)	Total	
			percent	n
Above median ^c	63	37	100	43
Below median ^c	33	67	100	43

^aCell medians, rather than the overall median, were used for this test. Median changes in purchase levels for the satisfaction groups are as follows:

All	-\$10.00
Very Satisfied	-7.50
Somewhat Satisfied	-6.19
Somewhat Dissatisfied	-11.56
Very Dissatisfied	-16.25

^b $\chi^2 = 3.78, p < 0.05$; median = -\$11.30.

^c $\chi^2 = 6.71, p < 0.005$; median = -\$10.60.

the handling of their complaint. Furthermore, all respondents were queried at once concerning their satisfaction with company response. Therefore, given a range of company response times, some respondents were describing a more recent company response than others were describing, a discrepancy which might affect reactions.

Use of credit card records involved another limitation, in that it was not possible to determine whether the complaining individual was the person who made all pre-complaint or post-complaint purchases on an account. An exploratory study of purchases by a small sample of the company's complainants did find that more than 80 percent of the dollars (both pre-complaint and post-complaint) were spent by the complainants themselves. However, both expense and privacy considerations precluded obtaining actual purchaser names from all credit card records.

Keeping these limitations in mind, some tentative conclusions may be drawn. First, researchers may be treating "complaints" as homogeneous when, in fact, monetary and nonmonetary complaints should be distinguished. The literature suggests that an individual complains based on his/her expectations. Therefore, findings of different satisfaction outcomes suggest that the expectations of consumers who complain about losing money, such as on a purchase or repair, may be different from those of consumers who complain about problems that did not cost them money, such as a dirty restroom or surly attendant. It is possible that the latter group, not expecting a personal "payback" after their complaint, would not complain without an extremely high level of annoyance. If so, these are extremely annoyed people with presumably less precise expectations of what they will accomplish by complaint (as noted previously). Their relative lack of satisfaction with organiza-

tional response is thus no surprise, but represents opportunity for creative corporate thinking. There is a need to study what expectations exist for nonmonetary complaints. For example, it is possible that consumers expect copies of letters from headquarters to the site of the unsatisfactory experience and/or copies of followup reports on whether or not the condition was corrected.

The lack of support for the second hypothesis may suggest that factors other than size of monetary loss make up complainants' expectations concerning the outcome of voicing their complaints to the seller. Moreover, higher claimed losses may evoke more solicitous corporate response, counterbalancing the hypothesized higher and thus harder-to-meet expectations. If companies are in fact more responsive to larger claimed losses, they may be pursuing a strategy dictated by a legal department which assumes that a large loss is likeliest to become a lawsuit.

The idea that the way complaints are answered does affect satisfaction/dissatisfaction is substantiated by the results of testing Hypotheses 3 and 4. The finding that response time and satisfaction level were unrelated for people claiming monetary loss can be easily associated with the presumption of different expectations in complaining. A nonmonetary complaint may well be associated with expectation that the problem will be recognized by the company, with their response a symbol for such recognition. A monetary complaint, by contrast, would be associated with expectation that the problem will be "fixed" by repayment. Money received could well outweigh time necessary to receive it as an influence on satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

The tests of the hypotheses relating satisfaction/dissatisfaction to repurchase do support the general notion of consistency theory. Apparently, a consumer is more likely to buy from Organization X—and to buy more often—if he or she is not greatly dissatisfied with the response to a complaint. There is no evidence that once a company response is "satisfactory," the degree of satisfaction affects repurchase significantly. Presumably, other market factors take precedence. Overall, the results of this research do support several of the hypothesized relationships based on discrepancy theories.

[Received July 1981. Revised July 1982.]

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Ralph J. (1963), "Consumer Dissatisfaction: The Effect of Disconfirmed Expectancy on Perceived Product Performance," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 10 (February), 38-44.
- Andreasen, Alan R. (1976), "A Taxonomy of Consumer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction Measures," *Proceedings of a Conference Conducted by the Marketing Science Institute with Support of the National Science Foundation*, ed. H. Keith Hunt, Cambridge MA: Marketing Science Institute, 11-35.
- Brock, Luther A. (1974), "Don't Bug the Consumer," *Sales Management*, 113 (September 9), 48-49.

- Cardozo, Richard N. (1965), "An Experimental Study of Customer Effort, Expectation and Satisfaction." *Journal of Marketing Research*, 2 (August), 244-249.
- Engel, James F., Roger D. Blackwell, and David T. Kollat (1978), *Consumer Behavior*, Hinsdale, IL: Dryden.
- Fenvesy, Stanley J. (1972), "How to Handle Customer Complaints," *Sales Management*, 108 (June 12), 34-39.
- Festinger, Leon (1957), *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Gilly, Mary C. (1979), "Complaining Consumers: Their Satisfaction with Organizational Responses and Subsequent Credit Card Repurchase Behavior," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Marketing, University of Houston, Houston, TX.
- Guzzo, Richard A. (1980), "Paradigms Compared: Consumer Satisfaction and Worker Satisfaction," paper presented to American Psychological Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Howard, John A. and Jagdish N. Sheth (1969), *The Theory of Buyer Behavior*, New York: John Wiley.
- Kendall, C. L. and F. A. Russ (1975), "Warranty and Complaint Policies: An Opportunity for Marketing Management," *Journal of Marketing*, 39 (April), 36-43.
- Kraft, Frederic B. (1977), "Characteristics of Consumer Complainers and Complaint and Repatronage Behavior," in *Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, ed. Ralph L. Day, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Business, 79-84.
- Landon, E. Laird (1977), "A Model of Consumer Complaint Behavior," in *Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, ed. Ralph L. Day, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Business, 31-35.
- Nicosia, Francisco M. (1966), *Consumer Decision Processes: Marketing and Advertising Implications*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Oliver, Richard L. (1977), "A Theoretical Reinterpretation of Expectation and Disconfirmation Effects on Posterior Product Evaluation: Experiences in the Field", in *Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, ed. Ralph L. Day, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Business, 2-9.
- Olshavsky, Richard W. and John C. Miller (1972), "Consumer Expectations, Product Performance and Perceived Product Quality," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 9 (February), 19-21.
- Resnik, Alan, Brian Gnauck, and Rodney Aldrich (1977), "Corporate Responsiveness to Consumer Complaints," in *Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, ed. Ralph L. Day, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Business, 148-152.
- Spector, Aaron J. (1956), "Expectations, Fulfillment and Morale," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 52 (January), 51-56.
- Swan, John E. (1977), "Consumer Satisfaction with a Retail Store Related to the Fulfillment of Expectations on an Initial Shopping Trip," in *Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, ed. Ralph L. Day, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Business, 10-17.
- and Fredrick I. Trawick (1979), "Satisfaction Related to Predictive vs. Desired Expectations," in *Refining Concepts and Measures of Consumer Satisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, eds. Ralph L. Day and H. Keith Hunt, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Business, 7-12.
- Westbrook, Robert A. (1980), "Intrapersonal Affective Influences on Consumer Satisfaction with Products," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 7 (June), 49-54.