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Handling customer complaints effectively: a comparison of the value maps of female and male complainants

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Handling Customer Complaints Effectively

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A Comparison of the Value Maps of Female and Male Complainants

Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the nature of complaint satisfaction with particular emphasis on the qualities and behaviors that male and female customers value during personal complaint handling service encounters.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A semi-standardized qualitative technique called laddering was used to reveal the cognitive structures of complaining female and male customers. In total, 40 laddering interviews with 21 female and 19 male respondents with complaining experience were conducted.

Findings – The research indicates that being taken seriously in the complaint encounter together with the employee's competence, friendliness and active listening skills are particularly important for both male and female complainants. Females were more able than male respondents to develop strong associations on the highest level of abstraction and link desired employee behaviors with several values. Female customers tended to be more emotionally involved than male customers as they wanted employees to apologize for the problem and sometimes needed time to calm down and relax. By contrast, male complainants were mainly interested in a quick complaint solution.

Research limitations/implications – Due to the exploratory nature of the study in general and the scope and size of its sample in particular, the findings are tentative in nature. As the study involved students from one university, the results cannot be generalized beyond this group even though in this case the student sample is likely to represent the general buying public.

Practical implications – If companies know what female and male customers expect, contact employees may be trained to adapt their behavior to their customers' underlying expectations, which should have a positive impact on customer satisfaction. For this purpose, the paper gives several suggestions to managers to improve active complaint management.

Originality/value – Our findings enrich the existing limited stock of knowledge on complaint management by developing a deeper understanding of the attributes that complaining male and female customers expect from customer contact employees, as well as the underlying logic for these expectations.

Keywords Complaint Satisfaction, Complaint Handling Encounters, Cognitive Structures, Gender Differences, Laddering, Means-End Approach

Paper Type Research Paper

Handling Customer Complaints Effectively

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A Comparison of the Value Maps of Female and Male Complainants

Vargo and Lusch's (2004) service-dominant (S-D) logic model emphasizes the role of value as a customer experiential phenomenon. This model sees customers as experiencing "value-in-use" during interactions with service or product bundles rather than value being embedded in products or services themselves (Woodruff and Flint, 2006). This means that companies can only make value propositions and "at best create the potential for value" (Flint, 2006, p.356) while it is the customer who decides what is of value to them. In line with the "value-in-use" approach, this paper investigates what complaining customers value in personal complaint handling service encounters and seeks to identify whether male and female complainants differ in what they value in such situations. For this purpose, a semi-standardized qualitative research method will be used to gain a valuable first insight into the value maps of female and male complainants.

Significance of customer complaining and complaint satisfaction

Many companies do not pay sufficient attention to handling complaints effectively (Stauss and Schoeler, 2004, Homburg and Fürst, 2007). This is surprising as customer complaints are a valuable source of important market intelligence (e.g. Priluck and Lala, 2009), which companies should use to correct the root cause of the problem and to improve the service or product (McCollough *et al.*, 2000; Brown *et al.*, 1996). Naylor (2003), however, illustrates how few companies recognize the importance of customer complaining through the estimate that fewer than 50 percent of complainants receive a reply from the company

and those that do often view the organization's response as unsatisfactory. It seems that the issue of service failure is still not adequately addressed by businesses especially when the seriousness of customer dissatisfaction for companies in the short and long term is considered. Negative word-of-mouth (Lerman, 2006) and switching to competitor firms (Homburg and Fürst, 2005), inevitably lead to the high costs of acquiring new customers (Hart *et al.*, 1990) if alternatives are available, if switching barriers do not exist, and if customers do not have loyal feelings towards the company (Colgate and Norris, 2001). On the other hand a positive approach to dealing with customer complaints should help to maintain customers and generate positive communication about the company (Boshoff and Allen, 2000; Stauss, 2002). Importantly repeat purchases by established customers usually require up to 90% less marketing expenditure than do purchases by first time buyers (Dhar and Glazer, 2003).

Current understanding of complaint satisfaction is limited (Kim *et al.*, 2003) as research has focused predominantly on the customer's attitude toward complaining (Richins, 1982), attribution of blame (Folkes, 1984), and the likelihood of a successful solution (Singh, 1990). Further, research has focused on the complaining customer rather than employee characteristics (McAlister and Erffmeyer, 2003). Consequently, little is known as to how customers evaluate the recovery process (Holloway and Beatty, 2003). However, recent work by Wirtz and Mattila (2004) found that satisfaction is the main variable in service recovery, acting as a mediator variable and explaining the relationship between post-recovery behaviors and service recovery dimensions.

Stauss (2002, p. 174) defines complaint satisfaction as "the satisfaction of a complainant with a company's response to her/his complaint". It is the result of a subjective evaluation process and Parasuraman *et al.*'s (1985) expectations-

disconfirmation paradigm provides a useful analogy to understand the process: Customers compare their expectations concerning the company's complaint handling activities with their perceptions. Customers should be satisfied if the experience exceeds expectations and dissatisfied if not; the theory also suggests that they will be indifferent if their perceptions equal their expectations but one might argue that at the very least the relationship may be maintained in such a situation.

Role of customer contact employees

In general customers make their complaints in person to contact employees (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007; Brown, 2000) and therefore these employees play a crucial role in creating complaint satisfaction. As customer contact employees are considered to have a critical role in the recovery of failures (Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003; Boshoff and Allen, 2000), they should also play an important role for creating complaint satisfaction in face-to-face complaint handling encounters. We need to understand the critical contact employee behaviors from a customer's point of view if we are to provide customer satisfaction (Winsted, 2000). This study suggests that it is largely the employee's response, in such face-to-face situations which influences the perception of the complaint handling encounter and the overall evaluation of the company's complaint resolution process. It is the behaviors and attitudes of customer contact employees which primarily determine the customers' perceptions of service quality (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996) and their role is vital for the recovery from failures and critical in creating complaint satisfaction (Bell and Luddington, 2006; Kau and Loh, 2006). Interpersonal service situations offer an opportunity to manage quality (Bearden *et al.*, 1998) and establish what kind of service delivery is satisfactory (Chebat and Kollias, 2000). The managerial implications are that

once a company has recognized and understood complaining customers' expectations, they can ensure that contact employees are trained to manage their behavior appropriately to match their customers' underlying expectations. Such behavior should have a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Botschen *et al.*, 1999).

Categorizing customers by gender preferences

Categorization of customers may help employees to reduce complexity and better organize, interpret, and evaluate customer interaction (Sharma and Levy, 1995; Szymanski, 1988). For example, observable characteristics such as gender may be used to adjust the complaint handling process to customers' expectations and needs. While research studies have identified differences between female and male customers information processing and decision-making styles (e.g. Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1993; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991), listening activities in retail interactions (e.g. McKechnie *et al.*, 2007), and service quality perceptions (e.g. Spathis *et al.*, 2004), only few researchers have investigated whether female and male customers differ in their complaining behavior (e.g. Keng *et al.*, 1995; Solnick and Hemenway, 1992).

In a service recovery context, McColl-Kennedy *et al.* (2003) found that male and female customers had significantly different preferences in terms of how companies should handle service recovery. Their research showed women as being more participatory than men, wanting more discussion during the service recovery process, and favoring those service providers with appropriate social skills during recovery encounters. They wanted to provide input, present their point of view, and be included in decisions. While women were particularly interested in how the company handles the service recovery process, male customers were more concerned with the outcome of a service

recovery. Further, Hess *et al.* (2003) found that female customers have higher service recovery expectations than male customers.

Objectives of the research study

In light of the limited knowledge in the area of complaint handling service encounters we want to investigate how female and male complainants want contact employees to treat them during personal complaint handling encounters. For this purpose, an exploratory research study using the means-end approach and the semi-standardized qualitative laddering interviewing technique (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) was regarded as appropriate as it allows researchers to gain a deeper insight into an under-developed research subject. In particular, we try to reveal the attributes (qualities and behaviors) of effective customer contact employees that female and male complainants value, to understand the underlying benefits that they look for during personal complaint handling encounters, and to graphically illustrate the findings in a value map.

The means-end approach and the laddering interviewing technique

The means-end approach was described by Grunert *et al.* (2001, p. 63) as “one of the most promising developments in consumer research since the 1980s”. Woodruff and Flint (2006) recommended that customer value research should focus more on means-end theory as it supports Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) “value-in-use” concept. The means-end approach (Gutman, 1982) which was directly referred to in Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) seminal work, reveals the attributes of products, services or behaviors (the “means”), the consequences of these attributes for the consumer, and the personal values or beliefs (the “ends”), which are satisfied by the consequences.

Attributes are the characteristics of a product or service while the consequences are the reasons why an attribute is important. They are the psychological or physiological aspects which motivate a customer to use a product or service. Values are personal and general consequences which people strive for and as such are more universal concepts. It is the links between attributes, consequences and values which form the means-end chains, the mental connections that link the different levels of knowledge (Reynolds *et al.*, 1995).

Early work in this area helped to resolve product-or brand positioning problems and to link the consumer's product knowledge to his/her self-knowledge (Gutman, 1982; Olson and Reynolds, 1983). More recently, the means-end framework has been applied to domains such as relationship marketing (Paul *et al.*, 2009), sales management (Deeter-Schmelz *et al.*, 2002, 2008), service failure and recovery in the hospitality industry (Lee and Sparks, 2007), business-to-business relationships (Rogers and Ryals, 2007), and services marketing (Gruber *et al.*, 2006).

According to Christensen and Olson (2002), the means-end chain approach is the most prevalent framework for researchers to identify and represent both the content and the structure of consumers' mental models. Similarly, Valette-Florence (1998) maintains that the means-end chain approach is of prime importance for the study of cognitive structures. The term "cognitive structure" refers to "the factual knowledge (i.e. beliefs) that consumers have about products and the ways in which that knowledge is organized" (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987, p. 414). By linking newly acquired knowledge to existing knowledge, consumers develop cognitive structures in their memory. Cognitive structures guide the thinking and behavior of consumers in many aspects of consumption (Christensen and Olson, 2002). In particular, they help individuals process incoming information and interpret the world in a meaningful way by reducing the input from the

confusing and complex environment which individuals inhabit (Chisnall, 1995; Zinkhan and Braunsberger, 2004). Cognitive structures are often displayed as networks of cognitive categories and the linkages between them. A system of means-end chains can then be seen as an extract from the cognitive structure that is regarded as being significant for explaining consumer behavior. The ladders revealed during the laddering process normally uncover some parts of the respondent's cognitive structure. These ladders are, however, not sufficient to evaluate the respondent's complete cognitive structure, which is regarded to be an interconnected net of associations and not a set of single chains. Grunert *et al.* (2001), nevertheless, propose that the ladders from a group of homogeneous respondents appropriately analyzed can produce an estimate of this group's cognitive structure. Although the original means-end approach assumed consumer knowledge to be hierarchically organized (Reynolds *et al.*, 1995), modern cognitive psychology suggests that cognitive structures are of a complex network (Herrmann, 1996). Thus we should regard means-end relations as semantic relations between concepts with both hierarchical and non-hierarchical relations (van Rekom and Wierenga, 2007).

In this study, laddering is the interviewing technique used to reveal means-end chains as it is commonly used for the identification and mapping of cognitive structures and to illustrate them in value maps (Christensen and Olson, 2002). It provides a way to gain deeper insights into the consumers' personal values and basic motivations and to examine the consumer's individuality in depth while still producing quantifiable results. Laddering usually involves personal semi-standardized in-depth interviews where the interviewer's probing questions are used to reveal attribute-consequence-value chains by taking the subject up a ladder of abstraction. For this purpose, the interviewer repeatedly asks: "Why is attribute/ consequence/value xyz important to you?", with the answer to this question

serving as the starting point for further questioning. The aim of the sequence of probing questions is to identify cognitive relationships of personal relevance to the respondent (Gengler and Reynolds, 1995). Laddering assumes that customers have knowledge about the symbolic and/or personal value that products or services help them to achieve (Peter *et al.*, 1999).

Cognitive concepts gleaned during the laddering interviews are summarized in a graphical representation of a set of means-end chains known as a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) (Gengler *et al.*, 1995). An HVM consists of nodes representing the most important attributes/consequences/values (conceptual meanings) and lines, which indicate links between concepts. By graphically summing up the information collected during the laddering process a HVM can be described as reflecting the customer's voice (Zaltman and Higie, 1993).

The exploratory research study

In order to achieve significant understanding of the main concepts, laddering studies should include around 20 respondents (Reynolds *et al.*, 2001). We conducted 40 laddering interviews with 21 female and 19 male respondents with complaining experience. We did not pursue further data collection at this point as we had achieved theoretical saturation, in that no new or relevant data emerged, and all concept categories were well developed, with the linkages between categories well established (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The study was carried out amongst postgraduate students aged between 20 and 45 years ($X=24.8$) enrolled in two business management courses at a European university. As we were interested in the behaviors and qualities of contact employees and the majority of

behaviors of service employees are the *same* across different service industries (Winstead, 2000) we did not ask respondents to think of a specific industry.

All interviewees were asked the question “*Given that a service or product failure has occurred, what qualities should customer contact employees possess and what behaviors should they exhibit to create complaint satisfaction during personal complaint handling service encounters?*” The responses acted as the starting point for the laddering probes to uncover the complete means-end structure. Questioning continued until respondents gave either circular answers, or were not able or willing to answer or had reached the value level.

In this study we were particularly interested in the complaint handling process. While research reveals that product or service failure severity has an impact on service recovery/complaint handling encounter evaluations (e.g. Levesque and McDougall, 2000; Mattila, 2001), we followed Weun *et al.* (2004, p. 139) who found that “the influence of the process of service recovery on post-recovery satisfaction is stable across varying levels of service failure severity”. Therefore we did not distinguish between varying levels of service or product failure severity. Importantly, Weun *et al.* (2004, p.141) showed that the significance of interpersonal attributes such as friendliness and courtesy “is the same across both major and minor service failures”. Furthermore, McCollough *et al.* (2000) suggest that the severity of a (service) failure is specific to the context and the individual. What one individual regards as a low-harm failure could be a high-harm failure for another individual. Similarly, Mattila (2001) believes that every individual perceives the seriousness of a failure differently based on both situational and individual factors.

Data analysis

The collected laddering data were analyzed in three stages, as recommended by Reynolds and Gutman (1988). Firstly, sequences of attributes, consequences and values (the 'ladder') were coded to make comparisons across respondents. For this purpose, the decision-support software program LADDERMAP (Gengler and Reynolds, 1993) was used to categorize each phrase from the questionnaire as either an attribute, consequence, or value. During this first phase meaningful categories were also developed so that comparable phrases and data points could be grouped together. Coding was an iterative process of (re)coding data, splitting and combining categories, generating new or dropping existing categories, in line with content analysis techniques (Krippendorff, 2004; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Categories were identified through phrases and key words that respondents used during the laddering interviews, as well as from concepts derived from the literature review and Schwartz's (1992) value list which provides an overview of generally held values. In this connection, Schwartz (1994) defines values as "desirable transsituational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity" (p. 21). For example, individuals may wish to be rich or to be powerful entrepreneurs. Values also include affects (feelings and emotions) related to such goals. The attainment of a value will create a positive affect (e.g. satisfaction and joy), while the impediment of a value will result in a negative affect (e.g. anger and disappointment).

Grunert *et al.* (2001) point out that analysts have a lot of latitude during the coding process. They, however, do not believe that the coding process will necessarily benefit from having parallel coders. They suggest that the analyst who has conducted the laddering interview "will be the best possible coder because she or he will remember part

of the context information (and also better be able to clarify matters by referring back to a tape)” (Grunert *et al.* 2001, p. 78). A second coder who does not possess context information may carry out the coding task in a different way and intercoder reliability scores would then be low. As a consequence, the two researchers who conducted the laddering interviews coded the laddering data independently to ensure reliable interpretations. Disagreements between the coders were discussed and resolved mutually and tables 1-3 show the agreed concepts.

Insert Tables 1-3 about here

In the second stage, the number of associations between the constructs on different levels (attributes/consequences/values) was expressed by aggregating individual means-end chains across respondents which resulted in an ‘implications matrix’, detailing the associations (i.e. ‘implications’) between the constructs. This matrix acts as a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative elements of the laddering technique by showing the frequencies with which one code (construct) leads to another (Deeter-Schmelz *et al.*, 2002; 2008). An implications matrix generally displays two different types of implications: in a direct implication one attribute/consequence is stated directly after another attribute/consequence in the same ladder, without any intervening attributes/consequences. In an indirect implication two attributes/consequences are stated in the same ladder but separated by at least one intervening attribute/consequence.

Finally, in the third stage, a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) was generated. This consists of nodes representing the most important attributes/consequences/values, and of lines indicating links between concepts (Claeys *et al.*, 1995). Such a HVM normally consists of three different levels relating to the three *concepts of meaning*: attributes,

consequences, and values. Frequently, the lower section of the map tends to be cluttered and crowded due to the large number of attributes obtained during laddering (Gengler *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, avoiding several crossing lines (i.e. overlapping ladders) is important for improving the interpretability of the HVM.

Two hierarchical value maps present the aggregated chains graphically, figure 1 (for female respondents) and figure 2 (for male complainants). The HVMs only display concepts of meaning at the cutoff level 2, so that at least two respondents had to mention linkages between concepts for them to be represented in the HVM. Higher cutoff points improve the interpretability of the map but result in a loss of information. The cutoff level of two was chosen as the resulting HVM keeps the balance between data reduction and retention (Gengler *et al.*, 1995), and between detail and interpretability (Christensen and Olson, 2002).

Results and discussion

The value map for female respondents (figure 1) reveals a complex cognitive structure. The size of the circles represents the frequency female respondents brought up a certain concept. The most important attributes for females are the contact employees' friendliness, active listening skills ("active listening") and competence. Although employee's friendliness was mentioned the most often as an employee attribute, it is the employee's active listening skills which are of particular importance for female customers. The importance of "active listening" is indicated by the width of the line joining this attribute with the consequence "take problem seriously". Contact employees who listen actively receive, process, and respond to messages in such a way that further communication is encouraged. This supports findings from the personal selling and sales management

literature which suggests that an employee's listening behavior plays an important role for personal interactions (e.g. Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). In this research study such skills whether inherent or through training appear to be particularly important for female complainants as the strong link to "take problem seriously" shows.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Female complainants also want competent contact employees who have sufficient product or service knowledge and prior experience to interact successfully with them. Frontline employees should have knowledge about the product or service and they should know what needs doing to solve the problem at hand. Van Dolen *et al.* (2004) describe complaint handling competence as the extent to which employees can influence the outcome of the interaction through their skills. Complaint handling competence is a resource that contact employees bring to the complaint handling encounter and that does not depend on the complaining customer's input during the encounter (Jaccard *et al.*, 1989; Van Dolen *et al.*, 2004). Complaint handling competence consists of social, professional, and methodological competence (Büdenbender and Strutz, 1996). In particular, respondents want employees to have sufficient product or service knowledge and prior experience to interact successfully with them. This reflects the work of Becker and Wellins (1990) who found that customers want employees to have both an understanding of the company's products and services as well as those policies and procedures that relate to customer service.

The consequence "take someone seriously" was by far the most central concept for female respondents and was strongly linked with three values ("justice"; "well-being"; "self-esteem"). "Justice" in particular plays an important role for female customers and

implies that they, having spent money on a product or service that has not met their expectations and now investing time and effort in bringing the problem to the attention of the company, wanted fair treatment. Female complainants expected reciprocation in the time and effort of employees of that company and so contact employees need to show the effort they are making to solve the problem and to compensate female customers for the costs they have incurred. Female respondents also believed that contact employees should treat them in a friendly manner with courtesy and respect, revealing the importance that courtesy plays in evaluating personal services (e.g. Chandon *et al.*, 1997; Wels-Lips, 1998). Female customers also expected an apology (“excuse”) from the employee. Further, “take someone seriously” was related to a fourth value (“security”), indicating that female complainants wanted to have certainty in the resolution of their problem.

The main reason for complaining was to receive a “problem solution”, but not only did female respondents expect employees to solve the problem, but also they needed to be taken seriously and for employees to be motivated and willing to help. If employees solved the problem, female customers would feel satisfied (“satisfaction”) and have time for other things, which in turn would make them feel better (“well-being”). In being taken seriously female complainants also expected employees to take time to ensure that they were appropriately dealt with which corroborates with previous research by Hart *et al.* (2007) in a retail setting.

Female complainants thought that they could assist employees in solving the problem if they were relaxed and had calmed down (“calm down”). In general, complainants often enter the complaint handling encounter in an angry mood which makes it difficult for contact employees to resolve complaints as customers are not open for

rational explanations and arguments. In these situations, the frontline employee's friendliness can help female customers to feel a bit more at ease.

Figure 2 shows that for male customers, the consequence "take someone seriously" was also the central concept. While it leads to feelings of satisfaction, it was only strongly linked with one value ("well-being") as the width of the line between both concepts in the HVM reflects. They also wanted frontline employees to be friendly, competent and willing to listen actively. "Competence" is strongly linked with the employee's complaint handling activities, which should lead to the solution of the problem.

Insert Figure 2 about here

"Take someone seriously" is influenced by a large number of attributes. Male customers wanted employees to get in contact with them again to find out whether the problem had been solved accurately and satisfactorily ("feedback"). They also desired a personalized approach ("personalization") from courteous and empathetic employees. In contrast to female respondents, male customers wanted a speedy resolution ("speed") which helps them to save time which they can better use to enjoy life and have fun ("hedonism"). Unlike female customers, males did not mention that employees should take sufficient time to handle the complaint ("take time"). This supports Hart *et al.* (2007) who found that in a retail context male consumers prefer fast and efficient shopping. But this also appears to reflect what might be a more fundamental difference between the genders with regard to the process and outcome of complaining. For men the solution, so that they can save time and move on to other activities (hedonism), is very important and while women also require a solution to their problems, the way in which that solution is reached and presented to them is critical. In contrast to female customers, male respondents mentioned

the consequence “learning”, which suggests they wanted to learn something about why the problem happened, and they expected contact employees to give the impression of being unbiased (“objectivity”). According to the HVM, male customers particularly wanted to satisfy the following values: “well-being”, which was mentioned 14 times and “justice” (8 times). Interestingly, customers who feel good (“well-being”) also felt freed from doubt and have certainty (“security”). These complainants then also felt respected and confident (“self esteem”).

Managerial implications

The paper’s aim was to give a first valuable in-depth insight into what complaining male and female customers value in personal complaint handling encounters by revealing several important constructs in their cognitive structures. The results of the study indicate several similarities but also some differences between female and male complaining customers. The laddering interviews reveal that, above all, contact employees have to take complaining customers seriously as individuals. Interpersonal aspects such as friendliness and listening skills are central to satisfying such basic needs (Oliver, 1997; Schneider and Bowen, 1995). Similarly, Helms and Mayo (2008) recently pointed to the importance of the “soft side” of customer service. While companies have to be sure they are dealing with complaints efficiently they must also offer, what Chebat *et al.* (2005, p. 340) term “psychological compensation” by responding appropriately to complaining customers’ emotions. As a consequence, companies should recognize the role of customer emotions and recruit employees who are capable of detecting complaining customers’ emotional states and dealing appropriately with them. Several values were cited as particularly relevant and desirable, these include self-esteem, well-being, justice, and security. Above

all, customers want to feel in good hands (“well-being”); female customers in particular desire fair treatment (“justice”) and are more oriented to the process of complaint satisfaction than their male counterparts. Customers who complain have spent money on the product/service that did not meet their expectations and are prepared to invest time and effort in bringing the problem to the attention of the company. For these costs, complaining customers expect employees to make equivalent investments. Contact employees need therefore to explicitly show effort, to solve the problem and to compensate customers for all costs incurred. Respondents expect reciprocal courtesy and respect from employees when the customer is being friendly, courteous and respectful to them. For successful complaint resolution it is necessary for organizations to employ people capable of treating customers in this way and therefore they should recruit only those who are genuinely willing to help and to act on the behalf of their complaining customers. The found importance of justice also supports findings by authors such as Tax *et al.* (1998) who believe that customers expect company action and justice after having voiced their complaints.

The analysis of the hierarchical value maps also reveals the differences in what female and male complainants value: female customers were more able than male respondents to develop strong associations on the highest level of abstraction (value level) and to link consequences with several values. From a managerial perspective recognizing other differences between males and females could be critical for appropriate complaint resolution. This research suggests that female customers require a deeper interaction with employees around this process. An important difference, for example, was that female customers wanted employees to apologize for the problem and to take time to handle the complaint and to ensure appropriate resolution. By contrast, male complainants were

interested in a quick solution. This finding supports Reynolds and Beatty (1999) who indicate that time-poverty could be a characteristic customer contact employees could use to classify customers. Speed of resolution might be a useful approach to deal with male customers while female customers may require more time intensive and process-oriented responses. Another difference was that female, but not male customers, felt they could assist employees in solving the problem by being relaxed, which would indicate that appropriately friendly frontline employees could help them to feel more at ease in what is often a nerve-racking experience.

Apart from these differences, the results revealed similar concepts valued by both female and male respondents. For example, both groups want contact employees to be competent, friendly and active listeners. These findings reinforce the need for companies to recruit only individuals who are genuinely friendly and willing to help and to act on behalf of their complaining customers. Companies need to engage with the importance of training employees in how to treat customers in a friendly and respectful manner. For this purpose, management should design training programs to enhance the customer (complaint handling) orientation among frontline employees. While such programs may represent a certain form of culture change for some, they should have a significant impact on both employee's attitudes and behaviors (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000). Internal marketing that can also act as a culture change initiative (Kelemen and Papasolomou, 2008) could also help improve contact employees' customer orientation and help them become more service minded. For internal marketing to be effective, companies, however, need an internal marketing orientation (IMO), value their employees and be responsive to their needs (Gounaris, 2008).

After having taken part in these programs, frontline employees should demonstrate positive service attitudes and behaviors. They should have internalized pro-social service values and behave accordingly. It is of course possible, that some employees may behave in an appropriately customer oriented manner but will not have internalized service beliefs and values. Thus, the possibility of improving an employee's willingness to help customers through training may have limits and companies should therefore focus on recruiting individuals who inherently want to help customers. It has to be stressed that frontline employees should be *genuinely* willing to act on behalf of, and be friendly to the complaining customer as respondents in our study believed they would notice feigned positive emotions. Thus, an organizational setting is necessary that supports genuine positive emotions among staff (Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008) and companies should also reward customer contact employees who treat customers with attention, care, and respect (Helms and Mayo (2008).

Further, companies should try to recruit individuals who have strong listening, questioning, and verbal skills as complaining customers take these skills for granted. For this purpose, several techniques (e.g. role-plays) could be used in the recruitment stage to find job candidates with an appropriate level with such skills. As listening is a skill, it can be learned, taught, enhanced and evaluated (De Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). Ramsey and Sohi (1997) suggest the following training activities: Customer contact employees could enhance their sensing skills by focusing more on concentration and sensitivity (*Sensing* dimension of the active listening construct). Frontline employees should also be trained to improve their capability to analyze messages and interpret their correct meanings. Therefore, they have to increase their knowledge base by including scripts and cues to their repertoire (*Evaluating* dimension). Finally, contact employees

have to be able to respond better to customers; they have to enhance their verbal communication skills and to improve their patience and adaptability (*Responding dimension*).

Organizations can help contact employees learn these skills through role-playing and other appropriate training tools but companies also need to ensure that training in active listening takes place throughout the employee's career and not only during the initial training period (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997).

Limitations and directions for further research

The research study has several limitations. First of all, as the study involved students from one university, the results cannot be generalized beyond this group even though a student sample is likely to represent the general buying public (Bodey and Grace, 2006) and our respondents had both sufficient working and complaining experience.

Due to the explorative nature of the study and the scope and size of the sample, the results are tentative. While this study was conducted with postgraduate students enrolled in two business management courses, what is now needed is similar research with different sample populations. Results from these studies could then be compared and differences and similarities revealed.

Further research could also take a dyadic approach and investigate whether customer expectations differ greatly from what contact employees believe customers want as service providers may not always know their customers' service quality expectations (Bitner *et al.* 2000). Similarly, Mattila and Enz (2002) found a large gap between customer and employee perceptions regarding service quality expectations. By conducting laddering interviews with both parties, the resulting hierarchical value maps could highlight

different views and compare customers' and employees' perception of the complaint process. Insights gained could make contact employees and company managers aware of differing perceptions and identify areas for staff training.

While it is expected that interviewers will record information in an unbiased manner, there is, however, a possibility of interviewer bias when conducting personal interviews. Consequently, interviewers have to be skilful in using the techniques of prompting and probing as they could otherwise influence respondents to give an 'expected' answer. We have therefore tried to minimize personal leanings and not push respondents up the ladder of abstraction but to accompany them on their way up. It was important for us to find a balance between helping respondents to climb the ladder and avoiding influencing their answers.

Conclusion

Most dissatisfied customers decide not to complain (Vorhees *et al.*, 2006) rather they exit the service (Bodey and Grace, 2006). Companies, however, should encourage dissatisfied customers to complain so that they can solve the problem, learn from their mistakes and introduce value enhancing innovations (La and Kandampully, 2004), and retain the customer (Tronvoll, 2008). Companies who do not rise to the challenge of complaining customers are turning down the important opportunity of reclaiming and improving a relationship. Customers who complain are giving companies a second chance to strengthen the endangered customer-provider relationship and rebuild customer confidence, which has positive effects on customer retention and loyalty (Tronvoll, 2007).

This paper gives a valuable first insight into the cognitive structure of complaining female and male customers and into the desired behaviors and qualities of customer

contact employees to create customer complaint satisfaction in face-to-face complaint handling encounters. The study results indicate that complaining customers are people first and customers second, where the primary importance is the satisfaction of basic social needs. Both female and male customers want contact employees to take them seriously and to treat them fairly and courteously. The research suggests, however, that identifying differences between men and women's complaining behavior could prove useful in terms of identifying the right person to deal with male and female complainants and pursuing the most appropriate resolution strategy. In particular we suggest that women may have a stronger process orientation than men, where the way they are dealt with by employees is a more important factor than for men. Women, in particular, want to feel that they are talking to someone that is sympathetic and listens actively but who also has strong product knowledge and expertise.

This exploratory study has shown that the laddering technique is a useful tool in "digging deeper" and examining cognitive structures of complaining customers and illustrating them in value maps; we hope that fellow researchers develop further studies to test the application of the laddering technique in their investigations of the cognitive structures of individuals.

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Figure 1. Hierarchical Value Map of Female Complainants (Cutoff Level 2)

Notes: White circles represent attributes, grey circles consequences, and black circles values.

Figure 2. Hierarchical Value Map of Male Complainants (Cutoff Level 2)

Table 1. List of Attributes

Name of Attribute (in alphabetical order)	Number of times mentioned in ladders Male/Female	Characteristics
Active Listening	12/22	Contact employees should listen to what their customers are saying, ask questions and hear customers out.
Competence	13/20	Employees should have sufficient service (product) knowledge and the authority to handle customer problems adequately.
Courtesy	9/9	Employees should genuinely care about the customer.
Empathy	2/9	Employees should be willing to take the customer's perspective and to understand the customer's annoyance.
Excuse	-/3	Employees should apologize for the service/product failure.
Feedback	3/-	Employee should get in contact with the complainant again to find out whether the problem had been solved accurately and satisfactorily.
Friendliness	13/23	Employees should smile and give positive nonverbal cues.
Honesty	4/5	Employees should be sincere.
Motivation	4/4	Employees should be willing to try hard and to spare no effort.
Objectivity	3/-	Employees should give the impression of being unbiased and characterized by a matter-of-fact-orientation.
Personalization	3/-	Customers desire a personalized approach.
Speed	3/-	Employees should handle the problem quickly.
Take time	-/7	Employees should take sufficient time to handle the complaint.

Table 2. List of Consequences

Name of Consequence (in alphabetical order)	Number of times mentioned in ladders Male/Female	Characteristics
Calm down	-/7	Customers can calm down and relax from the nerve-racking experience.
Complaint handling	10/12	Customers want to believe that contact employees will handle the complaint.
Learning	2/-	Customers know more about product or service.
Openness (Customer)	-/5	Customers can be open with contact employees.
Satisfaction	6/7	Customers want to be satisfied.
Save time	7/7	Customers can save time.
Solution	14/25	Customers want to get the impression that contact employees will solve their problems.
Take problem seriously	6/12	Contact employees give the impression of taking the complaining customer's concerns seriously.
Take someone seriously	17/24	Customers want to get the impression that employees take them seriously.
Trust	4/5	Customers have confidence in the contact employee.

Table 3. List of Values

Name of Value (in alphabetical order)	Number of times mentioned in ladders Male/Female	Characteristics
Hedonism	3/-	Customers are pleasure-seeking and want to enjoy life and have fun.
Justice	8/16	Customers want to feel equitably treated.
Security	10/12	Customers want to have certainty and to be freed from doubt.
Self-Esteem	6/7	Customers want self-respect and confidence.
Well-being	14/13	Customers want to be in good hands and to feel happy.