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I want to believe they *really* care

How complaining customers want to be treated by frontline employees

Abstract

Purpose – Using a realist perspective, this paper investigates how complaining customers want to be treated by frontline employees in personal complaint handling encounters. For this purpose, an exploratory research study using the qualitative laddering interviewing technique was regarded as appropriate as it allows researchers to gain a deeper insight into an underdeveloped research subject. Following realist thinking and terminology, the exploratory study aims to develop a deeper understanding of the so-called micro structures of complaining customers.

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

Findings – The research shows that the most important attributes for complaining customers are the contact employees' authenticity, competence, and active listening skills. These concepts are linked with several consequences and values such as "Justice", "Well-Being", and "Security".

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 complaining customers expect, frontline employees may be trained to adapt their behaviour 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 handling and management.

Originality/value – Our findings enrich the existing limited stock of knowledge on complaint satisfaction by developing a deeper understanding of the attributes that complaining customers expect from frontline employees, as well as the underlying logic for these expectations. Revealing the important role of employee authenticity adds to our knowledge on complaint satisfaction. Another strong contribution of this paper lies in the finding that all the identified concepts must not be seen in strict isolation, as in previous research, but have to be understood as a network of interrelated concepts: The attributes of frontline employees have several important consequences for customers (e.g. the feeling of being taken seriously), which are then linked to consumers' personal values and basic motivations (e.g. perceptions of justice).

Keywords Complaint Satisfaction, Employee, Complaint Handling Encounters, Cognitive Structures, Laddering, Realism

Paper Type Research Paper

Introduction

Most dissatisfied customers decide not to complain (Vorhees *et al.*, 2006) rather they exit the service instead (Bodey and Grace, 2006). Companies, however, should encourage dissatisfied customers to complain so that they can solve the problem 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 (Rothenberger *et al.*, 2008). Customer complaints are a valuable source of important market intelligence which companies should use to learn from the complaint in general and to correct the root cause of the problem and to improve the service or product in particular (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 1996; McCollough *et al.*, 2000; Priluck and Lala, 2009; Vos *et al.*, 2008).

Unfortunately, many companies do not pay sufficient attention to handling complaints effectively (Homburg and Fürst, 2007; Stauss and Schoeler, 2004). Moreover, research by authors such as Lewis and McCann (2004), Naylor (2003), Andreassen (2001) and Tax and Brown (1998) indicates that the majority of complaining customers are dissatisfied with the company's complaint handling efforts. It seems that the issue of effective complaint handling is still not adequately addressed by businesses. In an increasingly service oriented world economy one might be surprised by this apparent disregard of customer complaints, especially when the seriousness of customer dissatisfaction in the short and long term is considered: Negative word-of-mouth (Blodgett *et al.*, 1995; 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 customers have alternatives 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 customer relationships 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).

Due to the apparent importance of handling customer complaints effectively, this paper explores how frontline employees should treat complaining customers in face-to-face complaint handling encounters to create complaint satisfaction. The following section describes this important concept in more detail.

Definition and attributes of complaint satisfaction

Stauss (2002, p. 174) defines complaint satisfaction as “the satisfaction of a complainant with a company’s response to her/his complaint”. Complaint satisfaction is the result of a subjective evaluation process; an analogy can be made with the expectations-disconfirmation paradigm (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985): Customers will compare their expectations concerning the company’s complaint handling activities with their perceptions and should be satisfied if the complaint handling experience exceeds their expectations but dissatisfied if the company cannot meet their expectations. Customers will be neither satisfied nor dissatisfied but indifferent if their perceptions equal their expectations.

The topic of complaint satisfaction appears to be a relatively neglected area of interest (Kim *et al.*, 2003) in both complaint management research with few papers regarding complaint satisfaction, and in practice with low customer complaint satisfaction rates in many industry sectors. Current understanding of complaint satisfaction is limited 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).

For companies to be able to handle complaints effectively, they not only need to know whether they meet, exceed or fall short of customer expectations, they also need to know which *elements* of the company's complaint response complaining customers evaluate (Stauss, 2002). In this regard, Stauss (2002) distinguishes between nine attributes of complaint satisfaction, which are based on an extensive literature review that he carried out together with Seidel (Stauss and Seidel, 1998):

Insert Table 1 about here

Based on Grönroos' (1982) service quality model and his distinction between functional and technical quality, Stauss (2002) allocates the nine attributes of complaint satisfaction to two dimensions: Outcome complaint satisfaction and process complaint satisfaction.

Outcome complaint satisfaction relates to the complaining customer's evaluation of *what* he received from the company (comparable to Grönroos' technical quality). Process complaint satisfaction relates to the customer's evaluation of *how* the company handled the complaint (comparable to Grönroos' functional quality). Stauss (2002) allocates the first attribute (adequacy/fairness of the outcome) to outcome complaint satisfaction and the remaining eight attributes to process complaint satisfaction.

Importance of interactional justice

Justice theory is an important concept that helps understand how dissatisfied customers evaluate complaint responses. Several researchers (e.g. Hirschman 1970; Richins 1987; Singh 1990) have early on emphasised the importance of the concept of perceived justice for the consumer

complaining process. Blodgett *et al.* (1993) even demonstrated that “once a dissatisfied consumer seeks redress, negative word-of-mouth behavior and repatronage intentions are then dependent (primarily) upon the complainants’ perceptions of justice.” (p.424). Similarly, Tax *et al.* (1998) believe that customers expect company action in general and justice in particular after having voiced their complaints.

In the case of a service or product failure, individuals will perceive inequity and they will try to restore equity by complaining (Lapidus and Pinkerton 1995). Complaining customers develop their equity or fairness perceptions by evaluating three facets of the complaint handling encounter: the fairness of the decision making criteria, procedures and policies used to accomplish the final outcome (procedural justice), the fairness and appropriateness of the obtained tangible outcomes (distributive justice), and the manner in which the service complaint handling process is carried out (interactional justice) (e.g. Tax and Brown, 1998; Tax *et al.*, 1998).

Although complainants consider all three justice needs to evaluate the effectiveness of the company’s complaint handling or service recovery efforts (Wirtz and Mattila, 2004), the main focus of this article is on interactional justice. Blodgett *et al.* (1995; 1997) showed that interactional justice has a greater impact on post-complaint variables like positive/negative word-of-mouth communication and repatronage intentions than distributive justice. Furthermore, Blodgett *et al.* (1997) discovered that high levels of interactional justice can *offset* lower levels of distributive justice. Therefore, complainants who were treated fairly during the recovery process may be willing to maintain a business relationship with the provider “when only a partial refund, exchange, or discount is given, provided that they are treated with courtesy and respect” (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997, p. 201). Early research by Goodwin and Ross (1990) already indicated that customers could be satisfied with only a partial refund, if they were treated kindly and respectfully. On the contrary, customers who were treated unpleasantly will not continue the

relationship with the retailer and will engage in negative word of mouth even in the case of a total refund.

Distributive and interactional justice may interact with customers applying a decision making rule consisting of two separate stages. According to Blodgett *et al.* (1997), distributive justice (the second stage) will only be taken into account in the case of a high level of interactional justice (the first stage). Furthermore, Tax *et al.* (1998, p. 82) discovered that tangible outcomes delivered by unfriendly employees will be regarded as less valuable, whereas customers will assess the outcome more favourable if employees put considerable effort in resolving the problem. In addition, Slama *et al.* (1993) came to the conclusion that treatment issues upset dissatisfied consumers more than performance issues. As a consequence, dissatisfied customers showed a high tendency towards negative word-of mouth communication and remained emotionally hurt for a long period of time.

Blodgett *et al.* (1997) and Karatepe (2006) come to the conclusion that interactional justice has a stronger impact on satisfaction than the other two justice dimensions. Interactional justice may especially be a more important moderator of reactions to unfairness than procedural or distributive justice are, because are more ambiguous regarding the moral accountability of both procedural structures and tangible outcomes (Folger and Cropanzano, 1998). Both the immediacy and transparency of social interactions make it relatively easier for customer to assign moral accountability when contact employees violate interactional justice principles (Folger and Cropanzano, 1998). This proposition is corroborated by Collie *et al.* (2000) who found that customers reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction in conditions where the service provider was courteous and respectful (high interactional justice) than customers who experienced conditions in which the service provider was rude and disrespectful (low interactional justice), irrespective of whether customers were aware or unaware of the outcomes

received by others. This stresses again the importance of understanding how exactly dissatisfied customers want to be treated by contact employees during complaint handling encounters.

The critical role of frontline employees dealing with customer complaints

Even though customers can choose from a variety of channels to voice their concerns, complaints are still made predominately in person to contact employees (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2010; Brown, 2000). Thus, these frontline 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 have an important part to play in creating complaint satisfaction in face-to-face complaint handling encounters. For companies to be able to provide customer satisfaction they have to understand the critical contact employee behaviours from a customer's point of view (Winsted, 2000).

In this study, we suggest that in face-to-face situations it is largely the frontline employee's response which influences the customer's perception of the complaint handling encounter and the customer's overall evaluation of the company's complaint resolution process. This premise is supported by previous research that found that it is the behaviours and attitudes of customer contact employees which primarily determine the customers' perceptions of service quality (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996) and service recovery (Liao, 2007). Frontline employees play a crucial role for the recovery from service failures and are critical for dealing with complaints as well (Bell and Luddington, 2006; Kau and Loh, 2006). Chebat and Kollias (2000) showed that the human interaction element is important for customers to determine whether service delivery will be deemed satisfactory. Importantly, customers' service encounter satisfaction can be increased by employees who are competent, able and willing to solve a problem (Bitner *et al.*, 1990). Further, Bitner *et al.* (1994) pointed out that the nature of the interpersonal interaction between

the customer and the frontline employee has an effect upon customers' satisfaction with services. In this regard, Helms and Mayo (2008) recently found that the lack of soft skills of contact employees (being rude and not paying attention to customers) is the most crucial problem that causes customers to defect to other service providers; it turned out to be much more important than the hard side of service (e.g. price).

The important implications are that once a company has recognized and understood what complaining customers expect from frontline employees, it can ensure that the right employees are recruited and trained effectively. Companies can then manage their employees' behaviours appropriately to match their customers' underlying expectations. Such behaviour should have a positive effect on customer satisfaction (Botschen *et al.*, 1999).

Objective of the research study

In light of the limited knowledge in the area of desired contact employee behaviours during complaint handling encounters to create complaint satisfaction, we seek to investigate how complainants want to be treated by frontline employees. For this purpose, an exploratory research study using the well-established laddering interviewing technique (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) was regarded as appropriate as it allows researchers to gain a deeper insight into an underdeveloped research subject.

Whether or not researchers explain their metatheoretical assumptions, nonetheless their research is influenced by their view of the nature of reality and the possibilities of gaining knowledge of that reality. Such premises need not be explicit to influence the research (Creswell, 2003). We would argue that explicit disclosure of researchers' metatheoretical assumptions should be encouraged to reveal their impact on the research study. In this regard there is still an assumption, although often implicit in the research literature that the choice for researchers is

essentially between only two views of natural and social science: positivism and various forms of interpretivism. In this paper, however, we present a third approach, that of realism, that merits further exposure and explanation particularly in the realm of academic marketing literature.

Following realist thinking and terminology, this study therefore aims to develop a deeper understanding of the so-called micro structures (Sayer, 2000) of complaining customers. In particular, we try to reveal the attributes (qualities and behaviours) of effective frontline employees that complainants value, and understand the underlying benefits that they look for during personal complaint handling encounters from this realist perspective.

The following section describes the essential characteristics of realism and then explains how cognitive structures of complaining customers can be investigated within this framework. In addressing this objective, the following section concentrates on the principles of realism. Other issues in realism research such as philosophical discussions (e.g. Bhaskar, 1978; Archer *et al.*, 1998), criteria for judging the quality of realism research (e.g. Healy and Perry, 2000; Thompson and Perry, 2004), and implications of the realism framework for research design and data analysis (e.g. Sobh and Perry, 2006) have been dealt with elsewhere and are not the prime concern of this paper.

The essential characteristics of realism

Despite the existence of different versions of realism, all forms do, more or less, share the following characteristics. Firstly, realists believe that reality exists independently of what individuals think of it. Something 'out there' has to exist to make science meaningful (Hunt, 2005, p. 131). This reality has powers and mechanisms which scientists cannot discover directly. They can only try to explain observable events which are caused by underlying mechanisms. In a transparent reality, science would only be concerned with uncomplicated data collection activities

as all data would be directly available for everyone (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). Further, realists agree that all data are implicitly or explicitly theory-laden, that no research inquiry can ever be value-free, and that to understand complex reality, multiple perspectives are necessary (Bechara and Van de Ven, 2007).

The form of realism promoted in Easton's work (2002; 2009) is that of critical realism. Critical realists advocate a particular "deep" ontology. Here, following Bhaskar (1978) reality is stratified and consists of the following three levels: the empirical domain comprises events that scientists can observe; in the actual domain events happen whether or not scientists experience them; and finally the structures, mechanisms, tendencies and powers that cause events and that researchers try to find are located in the real domain.

Realists take the view that social reality (society) consists of structures and activities of people (agency) that are real and relatively stable over time. Sayer (2000, p. 12), for example, defines "structure" as "a set of internally related elements". Realists use the term "agents" to emphasize the ability of individuals to set up and attain goals. This feature distinguishes structures from agents as structures are unable to set up goals and to act.

Realists try to get below and/or behind the surface appearance to discover the underlying generative mechanisms and structures (Potter and López, 2001). Scientists, however, do not stop their research activities as soon as they have discovered the causes for a certain event but continue to "dig deeper" to find the underlying mechanisms. The discovery of one deeper-level mechanism again will not stop the research process but motivates researchers to dig even deeper into the micro structure.

Analysing cognitive structures of complainants within the framework of realism

With the aim of “digging deeper” and discovering “observable or non-observable structures and mechanisms that underlie events and experiences” (Perry *et al.*, 1999, p.18), realists can employ several methods. Realism is a relevant paradigm for the use of qualitative research methods (Healy and Perry, 2000) to produce deep understandings of phenomena, to search for generative mechanisms, to examine how such mechanisms work in real situations, and to describe how causal powers interact to produce a social phenomenon. Danermark *et al.* (2002) emphasise the importance of theory development and the search for generative mechanisms. In order to get beyond the surface appearance of phenomena, and to find the deeper-level mechanisms which have caused the discovered mechanisms, researchers can use qualitative methods such as case studies (Easton, 2009), focus groups or in-depth interviews, which are all considered suitable for theory-building research within the realist scientific paradigm (Healy and Perry, 2000).

Laddering is one such suitable research method for realists to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon. 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. Recently, laddering has been used successfully in domains such as relationship marketing (Paul *et al.*, 2009), sales management (Deeter-Schmelz *et al.*, 2002, 2008), business-to-business relationships (Henneberg *et al.*, 2009), services marketing (Gruber *et al.* 2009ab; Gruber *et al.*, 2006), and higher education (Voss *et al.*, 2007).

During the laddering process interviewers ask probing questions to reveal structural relationships between attributes (“means”), consequences provided by those attributes, and personal values or goals that the consequences reinforce (“ends”). This corresponds with the view of realists that agents behave intentionally, which means that, to obtain a goal, an “agent uses a means to that end” (Danermark *et al.* 2002, p. 179). For this purpose, researchers repeatedly

question why, for example, an attribute is of relevance to the respondent with the answer to this question serving as the starting point for further questioning. This approach fits realist thinking that researchers should focus on finding answers to “reasons why” questions (Sobh and Perry, 2006). In addition, laddering and means-end chains are rooted in a cognitive approach and Hunt (2003) suggests that cognitive theories in consumer behaviour are compatible with realism. The arguments above act as the justification as to why the laddering interviewing technique and the means-end approach are consistent with realist thinking.

 Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the framework of realism, the means-end approach and the laddering interviewing technique. Realists aims to discover both the observable and non-observable structures and mechanisms that lie behind events and experiences (Perry *et al.*, 1999; Sobh and Perry, 2006). Although realist researchers have mainly focused on the analysis of macro (social) structures such as labour markets, class structures or bureaucracies (Danermark *et al.*, 2002), the micro level, e.g. cognitive structures are also considered worthy of investigation (Sayer, 2000). Indeed, analysis can be in all areas and at all levels such as small group structures, linguistic, personality, and communication structures.

Easton’s research (2002) for example revealed the importance of the nature of the exchange between buyers and sellers (a macro condition) and the deep processes and structures that lead to exchanges taking place. He, however, also pointed out that both participants (buyers and sellers) of the necessary relationship “may also, themselves, contain necessary relationships and structures” (Easton, 2002, p. 107). If the exchange partners are individuals (and not commercial organisations or informal groups), then these internal structures could be described as cognitive structures. This gives further support to the investigation of micro structures such as cognitive

structures and here the laddering technique is the standard method for assessment within the means-end paradigm (Christensen and Olson, 2002; Gengler and Reynolds, 1995).

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 behaviour 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 behaviour.

Importantly laddering allows (service) marketing professionals to uncover insights and information regarding their consumers’ personal values and basic motivations (Wansink, 2003) such that (realist) researchers should benefit from the application of the laddering technique when investigating the cognitive structures of consumers. The following section describes how we used laddering to investigate the cognitive structures of complaining customers.

The exploratory research study

Reynolds *et al.* (2001) suggest that laddering studies should include at least 20 respondents to gain sufficient insights. Our study consists of 40 laddering interviews with respondents (53% female and 47% male) who have complaining experience to achieve significant understanding of the main concepts that complainants value during personal complaint handling encounters. 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 19 and 45 years ($X=24.8$) enrolled in two business management courses at a European university. As we were interested in the behaviours and qualities of frontline employees and the majority of behaviours of service employees are the *same* across different service industries (Winstead, 2000) we did not ask respondents to think of a specific industry. We asked all respondents the following question: “*Given that a service or product failure has occurred, what qualities should frontline employees possess and what behaviours 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 and how complainants want to be treated by frontline employees (interactional justice). 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. Weun *et al.* (2004, p.141) showed that the importance 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 person considers 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. We also did not ask respondents whether the purchase/service was important to them or not as Chang (2006) showed that customers' satisfaction with service recovery is not affected by the importance of the service itself. Finally, the perceived severity of experienced service or product failure must have been high enough to exceed the customer's complaining threshold (Kowalski, 1996) as customers decided to express their dissatisfaction by complaining instead of just switching quietly to another provider or by taking no action at all.

Data analysis

As recommended by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), data were analysed in three stages. Firstly, we coded sequences of attributes, consequences and values (the 'ladder') to make comparisons across respondents. For this purpose, we used the decision-support software program LADDERMAP (Gengler and Reynolds, 1993) to categorize each phrase from the interviews as either an attribute, consequence, or value. During this first phase meaningful we also developed categories 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 which 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. Tables 2-4 show all identified concepts.

Insert Tables 2-4 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). Aggregating individual chains fits realist thinking as each respondent’s perception is “a window to reality through which a picture of reality can be triangulated with other perceptions [...]. That is, realism relies on multiple perceptions about a single reality” (Healy and Perry, 2000, p. 123).

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). 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).

Results and discussion

Figure 2 illustrates the hierarchical value map that presents the aggregated means-end chains graphically. The HVM only display concepts of meaning at the cutoff level 4, which means that linkages between concepts had to be mentioned by at least four respondents. Higher cutoff points improve the interpretability of the map but have a loss of information as a consequence. The cutoff level of four was chosen as the resulting HVM keeps the balance between detail and interpretability (Christensen and Olson, 2002) and data reduction and retention (Gengler *et al.*, 1995).

The value map for the 40 respondents reveals a complex cognitive structure consisting of 8 attributes, 8 consequences and 4 values.

 Insert Figure 2 about here

The size of the circles represents the frequency respondents brought up a certain concept. Thus, the most important attributes for complaining customers are the contact employees' authenticity, competence, and active listening skills ("active listening"). The importance of "authenticity" is indicated by the size of the circle and also by the width of the line joining this attribute with the consequence "being taken seriously".

Respondents want frontline employees who are authentic, who show *genuine* care for their them and their problems ("authenticity"). They should also be willing to take the customers' perspective and show that they understand their annoyance. Further, respondents want frontline employees to be friendly, courteous and helpful in a believable way. The respondents' desire for employees, who treat them in a genuinely friendly manner with courtesy and respect, also reveals the importance that courtesy plays in evaluating personal services (e.g. Chandon *et al.*, 1997; Wels-Lips, 1998).

Authenticity is linked to important aspects of human personality as Grandey (2003) showed that this concept has a direct impact on satisfaction levels. Similarly, Gountas *et al.* (2007) found that sincere, authentic displays have a positive impact on both customers' satisfaction with life and their overall satisfaction. In our research, authenticity is also linked indirectly (via "being taken seriously" and "solution") to customer satisfaction, which supports previous findings.

Moreover, complaining customers do not want employees who just smile to show friendliness but staff who truly mean it. This corroborates findings by Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2006) who explained that the perceived authenticity of the employees' displayed emotions, and not the amount of smiling, has a direct impact on customers' emotional states and perceptions. Respondents mentioned that they would detect inauthentic employees who only pretend to be friendly by paying close attention not only to their smiling but to both verbal and non-verbal cues. Regarding the latter, respondents would for example pay attention to vocalics (para-linguistic cues like vocal loudness or amplitude, vocal pitch, pitch variation, fluency, and pauses), oculusics (communicative eye behaviour (e.g. gaze), and kinesics (body movements and postures) (Gabbott and Hogg, 2000) and would notice mismatches that would reveal inauthenticity.

"Active listening" is connected to the consequence "take problem seriously" and "complaint processing". 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 behaviour plays an important role for personal interactions (e.g. Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). Finally, De Witt *et al.* (2008) suggest that employees' empathetic listening skills can increase customers' perceptions of (interactional) justice and should have a positive direct impact on their felt emotions.

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 which 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 who have sufficient product or service knowledge, which supports the work of Becker and Wellins (1990) who found that customers want employees to know about policies and procedures that relate to customer service and who also have a good understanding of the company's products and services as well.

Frontline employees who listen actively and who are competent give complaining customers the impression that their complaints are dealt with appropriately ("complaint processing"). "Complaint processing" includes employee behaviours such as taking notes during the interaction and informing customers about the next necessary steps to resolve their problems. Complaining customers realise that sometimes contact employees have only limited authority to handle their complaints autonomously. In these cases, frontline employees should at least quickly and in a friendly manner admit that they do not have the authority to process the complaint and refer to their line managers or another contact person who has the necessary authority. Respondents in the laddering interviews mentioned that this behaviour would be a "second best" solution for them. Under no circumstances, however, should frontline employees who do not have the authority to handle complaints autonomously pretend to have it. Customers would then be very annoyed and

they would not feel taken seriously as soon as they would detect that the employee only pretended to be able act independently and make decisions autonomously.

In this context, the consequence “being taken seriously” was by far the most central concept as it is strongly linked with several attributes of contact employees and several other consequences as well. Complainants who felt they were being taken seriously, developed confidence in the contact employee (“trust”) and felt in good hands (“security”).

The main reason for customers bringing the complaint to the attention of the frontline employee was to receive a “problem solution”, Respondents, however, not only expected employees to solve the problem, they also wanted to be taken seriously and believe that employees were motivated and willing to help (“motivation”). Complainants expected contact employees to give the impression of being unbiased (“objectivity”) and they also felt able to assist employees in solving the problem if they were relaxed and calm (“calm down”).

Complaining customers especially desire a speedy problem solution as they “have already been inconvenienced by the firm once and just want their problem solved with the minimum of delay” (Boshoff and Allen, 2000, p. 82). Customers then have time for other things (“save time”), which in turn would make them feel better (“well-being”). If employees solved the problem, customers would also feel satisfied (“satisfaction”).

Interestingly, customers would then also feel freed from doubt and would have certainty (“security”). These complainants would then also feel respected and confident (“self esteem”). Further, complainants desired a personalised approach (“personalisation”) from employees who should genuinely apologise for the problem (“apology”). Receiving an apology can compensate for emotional costs (Tax *et al.*, 1998) and is often associated with interactional justice (Smith *et al.*, 1998).

“Justice” was the value concept that respondents mentioned the most often. Complaining customers who had spent money on a product or service which had not met their expectations and invested time and effort in bringing the problem to the attention of the company, expect fair treatment. This need for reciprocation in the time and effort of the company’s employees implies that contact employees need to show real effort, solve the problem and compensate customers for the ‘costs’ they have incurred. The importance of justice supports findings by authors such as Tax *et al.* (1998) who believe that customers expect company action and justice after having voiced their complaints. Finally, respondents valued employees who ensured transparency and were open to suggestions (“openness”); this had a direct impact on respondents’ feelings of security.

Managerial implications

Using a realist perspective, the paper’s aim was to give a first valuable in-depth insight into how complaining customers want to be treated by frontline employees by revealing several important constructs in their cognitive structures. The following sections explain what management can learn from this study.

The important role of apology

During the laddering interviews, respondents cited several values as particularly relevant and desirable, these included self-esteem, well-being, justice and security. Above all, customers wanted to feel in good hands (“well-being”) and expected fair treatment (“justice”). Having invested time and effort in bringing problem to the attention of the company, complaining customers expected employees to make appropriate responses. Respondents expect reciprocal courtesy and respect from employees when they are being friendly, courteous and respectful. For

successful complaint resolution it is necessary for organizations to train and employ people who are capable of treating customers in this way.

Contact employees should for example apologise to the complainant for all emotional costs incurred. By apologising, the company, represented by the customer contact employee, takes responsibility for the existing problem, voices genuine regret and shows that it takes the customer's negative emotions like frustration, anger, annoyance, or contempt seriously (McKean, 2003). Study results indicate that genuine apologies can reduce anger and increase the customer's perceptions of fairness (Menon and Dubé, 2000; Seiders and Berry, 1998). Seiders and Berry (1998), for example, found that apologies are positively associated with customer's perceptions of service fairness in general and with interactional fairness in particular.

Employees should deal with customers' emotional states first

While companies have to be sure they are dealing with complaints efficiently they must also offer "psychological compensation" (Chebat *et al.*, 2005, p. 340) 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. Complainants often enter the complaint handling encounter in an angry mood and are not open to rational explanations and problem solution suggestions, which makes it often difficult for customer contact employees to resolve complaints (Tax and Brown, 1998). As a consequence, contact employees have to deal with their customers' emotional states first and try to help them calm down. Some complainants, however, may then still display negative emotions such as anger. As the display of anger is known to intimidate and stimulate anger in others, which makes it a very contagious emotion (Dallimore *et al.*, 2007; Menon and Dubé, 2000), contact employees should try to stay calm in these situations.

They should also not try to mimic the facial expressions of the angry complainants but display complementary (positive) emotions even if they are getting annoyed themselves (Menon and Dubé 2000) as angry customers look for meek employee responses (e.g. an apology) and not for mimetic responses.

Employees should listen carefully

The laddering interviews showed that respondents value interpersonal aspects such as genuine friendliness and also listening skills. Thus, regarding the latter, companies should try to recruit individuals who have strong listening, questioning, and verbal skills. For this purpose, several techniques (e.g. role-playing) 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 also later be taught to employees (De Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). Individuals with good active listening skills can sense situational cues from both the communication partner as well as from the environment. Furthermore, they possess good processing skills that allow them to appraise the relevance of cues and to make the right conclusions. As empathetic listeners can interpret cues appropriately, they are also able to identify personal characteristics and communication styles. As a consequence, they are capable of quickly evaluating the target's situation and of deciding on the appropriate communication approach (Comer and Drollinger, 1999). Employees should also take notes, if possible, during the encounter. This should encourage the customer to describe the problem accurately and it gives the impression that that the complaint is handled and taken seriously. The frontline employee's notes can then be used to find a solution for the customer's problem and to have a record of the incident. By listening carefully to the customer, the contact employee can also demonstrate that he understands the customer's situation and that he genuinely cares about the problem. Contact employees could also say customer-friendly sentences such as

“we want to assist in resolving this problem” or “let me try and find a solution for you” (McCull-Kennedy and Sparks, 2003, p. 264) so that customers get the impression that the company cares about them and their problems.

The importance of displaying authentic emotions

Our research results show that complaining customers want authentic employees who display *genuine* emotions. Thus, companies have to make sure that their employees are (at least perceived to be) authentic. Management often insists on employees showing particular (positive) emotions such as friendliness, which these achieve through controlling their emotional displays. Emotions are then regarded as commodities that are under organizational control through supervision, training and organizational procedures (Hochschild, 1983).

Employees can display the appropriate and demanded emotions by practicing “emotional labour” (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). As a form of impression management, emotional labour should influence customer emotions positively. Mann (1999, p. 361) found that “communications involving complaints attracted the highest recorded levels of emotional labour than any other type of communication.”

Employees can practice emotional labour either through surface acting or deep acting. Surface acting means that employees pretend to have certain emotions, which they do not truly feel, by displaying certain organisationally desired facial expressions, voice tones and gestures (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Recent research by Groth *et al.* (2009) showed that customers can identify feigned emotions to a certain degree, which makes surface acting a problematic strategy. The recognition of faked emotions will then negatively influence customer perceptions as they will not believe that the employee is sincerely interested in them and their problems and they will not feel taken seriously.

By practicing deep acting, employees may *sincerely* try to change their emotions so that they can play their role successfully. Employees either try to evoke (or conceal) certain emotions or use thoughts and images to elicit certain emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Groth *et al.* (2009) showed that deep acting has positive benefits (i.e. perceived customer orientation and service quality) for customers. Surface acting does not have these benefits and is only an unproblematic strategy as long as customers do not recognize it.

Thus, employees should engage in deep acting instead and they have to be trained appropriately for this purpose. For example, they can take part in empathy training or use perspective taking techniques (Groth *et al.*, 2009). In addition to training purposes, companies should also focus on recruiting individuals with good deep acting skills (Groth *et al.*, 2009).

Customers will only learn to trust companies if customer contact employees engage in deep acting *before* the encounter starts and consequently *genuinely* feel what they are required to feel during the encounter or if customers do not detect employees' surface acting *during* the encounter. By applying (undetected) surface acting strategies during the complaint handling encounter or deep acting strategies before the encounter takes place, customer contact employees should be able to influence the emotions of complaining customers in such a way that they are emotionally balanced enough to discuss problem solutions.

Recruiting genuine employees

Even though deep acting has several benefits, it is still an *acting* technique. A third emotional labour strategy is the display of genuinely felt emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993).

Surprisingly, only limited research has investigated the role of naturally-felt emotions (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2005). Our research, however, stresses the importance of having frontline employees who are perceived to be authentic and who *genuinely* willing to act on behalf of, and

be friendly to the complaining customer as respondents in our study believed they would be able to notice feigned positive emotions. This corroborates previous findings that showed that customers are able to detect inauthenticity (Ekman *et al.*, 1988; Grandey *et al.*, 2005; Groth *et al.*, 2009).

As the possibility of improving an employee's willingness to help customers through training may have limits (Teng and Barrows, 2009), companies should focus on recruiting individuals who *inherently* want to help customers and display positive and authentic emotions. Brown *et al.*'s (2002) research revealed that personality traits such as agreeability, emotional stability and need for activity are positively linked to service employees' customer orientation. Recently, Teng and Barrows (2009), based on an extensive literature review, suggested that companies could either use Hogan *et al.*'s (1984) service orientation index (SOI) or biodata inventories to select appropriate service personnel. SOI evaluates personality based job requirements with scales on adjustment, ambition, likeability, prudence, sociability and wittedness. Biodata inventories use 39 items to measure the individual's achievement needs, agreeableness, desire to make good impressions on others, responsibility, satisfaction with life, sociability, and stress resistance (Carragher *et al.*, 2005). Companies could also use Wood *et al.*'s (2008) recently developed authenticity scale, which has distinct variance from the Big Five traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism), to find suitable candidates.

Limitations and directions for further research

Like all research studies, this project has several limitations as well. First of all, even though interviewers should aim at recording information in an unbiased manner, we are aware of the fact that there is, however, always the possibility of interviewer bias when conducting face-to-face interviews. Consequently, interviewers have to be skilful at using the techniques of prompting

and probing as they could otherwise influence respondents to give a hoped-for answer. We have therefore tried to minimise personal leanings and not to push respondents up the ladder of abstraction but rather attempted to accompany them on their way up. It was important for us to find a balance between helping respondents to climb up the ladder and avoiding influencing their answers.

Secondly, the study only involved students, which means that 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), similar recent studies also used student participants (e.g. Dallimore *et al.*, 2007; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006) and our respondents had both sufficient working and complaining experience. However, it also has to be said that the potential for generalizability can never be achieved in any one study, but is an empirical question that requires comparisons over different studies (Greenberg, 1987). Thus, what is now needed is similar research with different sample populations. Results from these studies could then be compared and differences and similarities revealed.

Fellow researchers should also investigate the role of authenticity and its impact on customer satisfaction more closely as this important topic is still under-researched (Gountas *et al.*, 2007). As mentioned, research investigating the role of naturally-felt emotions has also been limited (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2005) but companies would benefit from recruiting genuine individuals, especially for long-term service relationships (Grayson, 1998).

The most convenient way for companies handling complaints is when the customer's problem can be solved during the first complaint handling encounter as further steps are then not necessary and the case can be closed immediately. In some cases, however, the problem cannot be solved at once due to e.g. a lack of information or organizational procedures. In these situations, several other employees have to carry out further activities that all have an impact on

the complaining customer's complaint satisfaction. Thus, fellow researchers could also investigate how customers' complaint satisfaction is influenced by interacting with several contact employees.

This research project focused on the desired qualities and behaviours of customer contact employees during face-to-face complaint handling encounters as the majority of complaints are still made in person (e.g. Lovelock and Wirtz, 2010). Moreover, by focusing on face-to-face interactions, we were able to study the complete spectrum of qualities and behaviours of contact employees, which other complaint channels (e.g. mail or email) do not offer. Further research, however, should explore the desire expectations of dissatisfied customers who decide to complain over the phone or the web (e.g. online complaint handling chats with contact employees), which both e.g. lack nonverbal communication cues. Further research could even investigate how complaining customers want to be treated by Avatars, which are online representations of individuals, in virtual service environments such as Second Life.

Instead of using the laddering interviewing technique and convenience samples, fellow researchers could use other techniques such as Association Pattern Technique (APT) questionnaires (Ter Hofstede *et al.*, 1998, 1999) to investigate the issue of complaint satisfaction. APT is a structured quantitative method that breaks down means-end chains into two independent parts: attribute-consequence (AC) and consequence-value (CV) associations. AC and CV linkages can be measured independently as attributes and values are conditionally independent, given the consequences. This technique can be used in mail questionnaires and allows researchers to generalise findings by using probability samples. Data analysis is uncomplicated as a time-consuming content analysis is not necessary to perform. Thus, fellow researchers could for example use the elicited concepts of meaning (attributes, consequences, and values) from this

qualitative study to develop a *quantitative* association pattern technique questionnaire, which would allow researchers to generalise findings by using probability samples.

Conclusion

Through the realist lens, this paper gives a valuable first insight into the cognitive structure (a micro condition) of complaining customers with regard to the desired behaviours and qualities of frontline employees dealing with complaints. Several concepts that are known from the literature such as “active listening”, “competence” and “apology” were identified and their importance was reinforced.

The study results especially indicate that complaining customers are people first and customers second, where the primary importance is the satisfaction of basic social needs. Even though the importance of social needs has been known in the (service) literature for quite some time (e.g. Schneider and Bowen, 1995), companies, unfortunately, still do not seem to pay sufficient attention to this important issue.

. In addition, the research also reveals the importance of authenticity, which, surprisingly, is also still an under-researched research topic that warrants more attention in the future, especially as respondents mentioned that they would detect inauthenticity. Complaining customers, above all, want frontline employees to show *genuine* concern for their problems and take them seriously as individuals or at least give the (undetected) impression of respecting their needs.

Another strong contribution of this paper is the finding that all the identified concepts from the laddering interviews that are shown in the hierarchical value map must not be seen in strict isolation, as in previous research, but have to be understood as a *network* of interrelated concepts: The attributes of frontline employees have several important consequences for customers (e.g. the feeling of being taken seriously), which are then linked to consumers’ personal values and basic

motivations (e.g. perceptions of justice). By using research techniques such as the laddering interviewing technique, researchers can reveal how all these identified elements that are of importance to customers are interconnected and interdependent, which then helps companies realise that focusing on concepts (e.g. employees being competent) in isolation is not sufficient for creating complaint satisfaction in face-to-face complaint handling encounters.

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Figure 1. The relationship between realism and the laddering technique

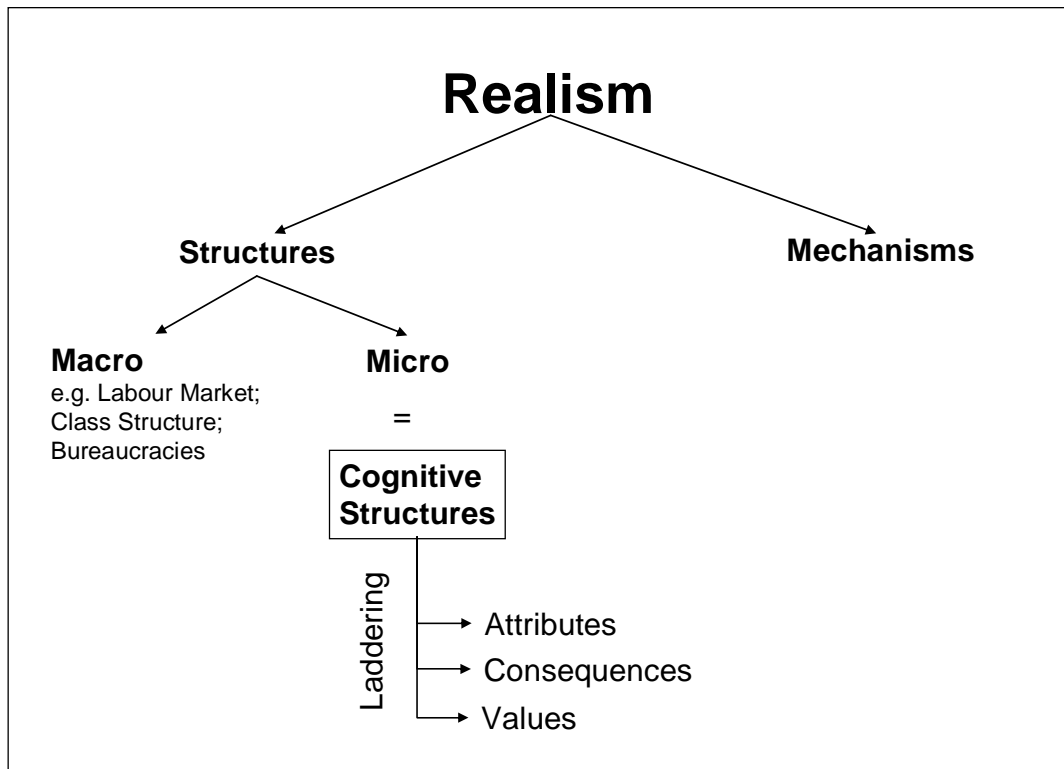


Figure 2. Hierarchical value map of complainants (cutoff level 4)

Notes: White circles represent attributes, grey circles consequences, and black circles values. Numbers (N) refer to concepts revealed in the ladders and not to the number of respondents)

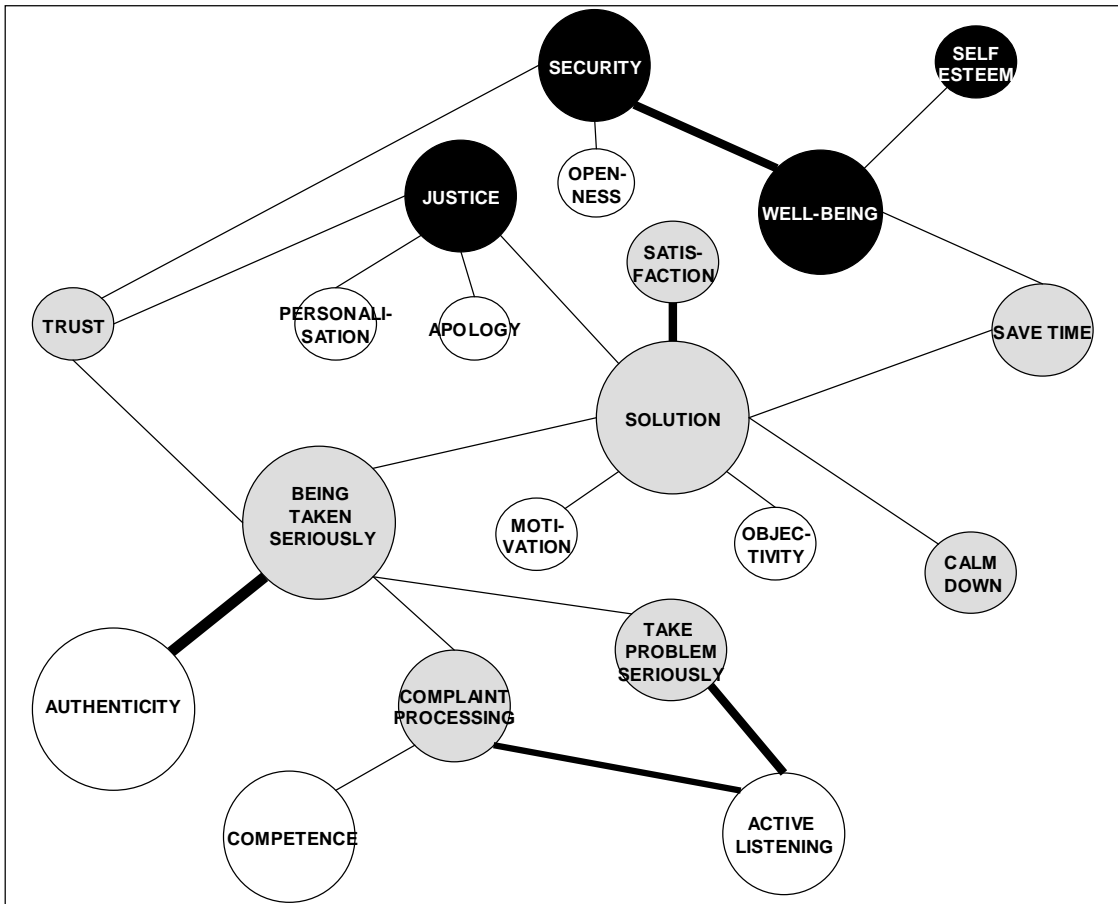


Table 1: Attributes of complaint satisfaction

Attributes of Complaint Satisfaction	Characteristics
1. Adequacy/fairness of the outcome	Adequacy of the problem solution; fairness of the compensation offered
2. Access	Ease of finding a competent contact person
3. Friendliness	Politeness, courtesy, communication style
4. Empathy	Willingness to take the customer's perspective, understanding the customer's annoyance, individual complaint handling
5. Individual Handling	Non-standardised response that is customised to the problem and the wishes of the complainant
6. Effort	Visible effort to solve the customer's problem
7. Active Feedback	Activity to find out the best solution for the customer; notification about delays, feedback about procedures and decisions
8. Reliability	Keeping of promises
9. Speed	Speed of reaction to the complaint, speed at which complaints are resolved

Source: Adapted from Stauss (2002, p. 176)

Table 2: List of attributes

Name of Attribute (in ranked order)	Number of times mentioned (in ladders)	Characteristics
Authenticity	33	Employees should show genuine care for their customers. They should also be willing to take their customers' perspective and show that they understand their annoyance. They should also be friendly, courteous and helpful in a believable way.
Competence	24	Employees should have sufficient service (product) knowledge and the authority to handle customer problems adequately.
Active listening	23	Contact employees should listen to what their customers are saying, ask questions and hear customers out.
Openness	6	Customers want employees to ensure transparency and be open to suggestions.
Objectivity	5	Employees should give the impression of being unbiased and characterised by a matter-of-fact-orientation.
Motivation	4	Employees should be willing to try hard and to spare no effort.
Personalisation	4	Customers desire a personalised approach.
Apology	4	Employees should apologize for the service/product failure.

Table 3: List of consequences

Name of Consequence (in ranked order)	Number of times mentioned (in ladders)	Characteristics
Being taken seriously	30	Customers want to get the impression that employees take them seriously.
Solution	29	Customers want to get the impression that contact employees will solve their problems.
Complaint processing	17	Customers want to believe that contact employees will handle the complaint.
Take problem seriously	16	Contact employees give the impression of taking the complaining customer's concerns seriously.
Satisfaction	11	Customers want to be satisfied.
Save time	9	Customers can save time.
Trust	6	Customers have confidence in the contact employee.
Calm down	5	Customers can calm down and relax from the nerve-racking experience.

Table 4: List of values

Name of Value (in ranked order)	Number of times mentioned (in ladders)	Characteristics
Justice	21	Customers want to feel equitably treated.
Well-being	20	Customers want to be in good hands and to feel happy.
Security	17	Customers want to have certainty and to be freed from doubt.
Self-esteem	10	Customers want self-respect and confidence.