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CONSUMER DISSATISFACTION AND
MARKET PERFORMANCE

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College of Commerce and Business Administration
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CONSUMER DISSATISFACTION AND MARKET PERFORMANCE¹

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for presentation at
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Abstract

This paper summarizes two earlier papers on (a) a taxonomy of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction measures and (b) results of a U.S. study of consumer problems across a broad range of product and service categories. The paper then assesses the extent to which unsolicited complaints data voiced to business are representative of all types of complaints and all consumers. The paper concludes that they are representative of neither but in the case of consumers, no significant patterns emerge across categories.

Introduction

The effective functioning of any socio-economic system depends upon adequate feedback about the system's performance. In marketing systems, measures of performance on the producers' side are relatively well developed. Measures on the consumers' side are not, relying for the most part on either sales or market share (really producers' measures) or global measures of consumer discontent or support for consumerism [4, 9, 13]. Until recent months we simply have not had even the beginnings of measures at the specific product and service level of consumer satisfactions and dissatisfactions with what they buy. Thus, we have not been able to answer fundamental questions about consumer satisfaction such as:

1. Just how often do consumers have problems with goods and services? Has this figure been rising or falling?
2. How often do consumers with problems complain to business, i.e. provide effective feedback?
3. When consumers do voice their problems to business, how often does business satisfactorily resolve such problems?
4. How do industries compare in the extent to which consumers experience problems, voice them to business, and receive satisfactory complaint resolutions.
5. How do countries with different market systems and different attitudes towards consumerism compare in both the frequency of consumer problems and the effectiveness of informal complaint--handling systems?

Clearly, answers to these questions are essential if government regulators, consumers and marketing professionals are to develop policies to significantly improve functioning of marketing systems from the consumer's perspective both within and across geopolitical divisions.

The present paper reports some of the work I and my colleagues have been carrying out in the last two years to try to fill this major gap in our abilities to assess socio-economic performance from the consumer's side.

The paper has three objectives:

1. to present briefly a taxonomy of alternative measurements of consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction.
2. to report summary data from the first national U.S. study of consumer problems across a broad range of product and service categories.
3. to assess the extent to which unsolicited complaints data voiced to business and government is representative of (a) all types of complaints and (b) all consumers.

Material relative to the first two objectives is provided in more detail in other sources [1, 3]. The analysis of the representativeness of complaint data is presented here for the first time.

The Problem of Measuring Consumers' Satisfaction and Dissatisfactions:

The broad class of measures of market performance from the consumer's side have been called by Hunt measures of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, or CS/D [3]. I have suggested elsewhere that there are eight broad types of measures one can take of CS/D depending on whether one chooses to monitor (a) satisfactions or dissatisfactions, (b) measured subjectively or objectively, (c) before or after sellers have the opportunity to remedy individual dissatisfactions. Figure 1 presents seven sets of alternative measures that can be or are being used to track CS/D in the U.S. and elsewhere. As McNeal has pointed out [3] in the past most CS/D evaluations are of three types: objective measures of final satisfaction (sales, market share, repeat purchases), subjective measures of initial satisfaction (primarily simple satisfaction scales contained.

in customer surveys) [7] or subjective measures of initial dissatisfaction (mainly frequency or unsolicited complaints).

Figure 1 about here

The first two of these measures have serious deficiencies. The principal problem with sales and market share measures is that (a) they are usually lagged indicators of dissatisfaction (for durables, very much lagged) and (b) they are subject to other competitive forces in the market place that can easily obscure real changes in consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Simple satisfaction scales used in several surveys are deficient in that they tend to underreport actual product and service problems and often only reflect shifts in consumer feelings about prices and inflation [1]. The third commonly used measure, unsolicited consumer complaints, has also been criticized as a biased source of satisfaction data since they emanate from only a limited segment of the consumer market. This issue of "representativeness" is one we shall return to below.

Direct Measures of Consumer Complaint Processes

As a result of these dissatisfactions, there is growing interest on the part of business and government in gathering data on consumer complaints directly from consumers through field surveys. Since such surveys can gather data on both voiced or unvoiced complaints in specifically defined purchase categories they have the potential for serving as an important new tool for the formulation of public policy. To date, there have been only a handful of empirical studies of consumer complaint behavior carried out [e.g., 10, 11, 15]. Unfortunately, these early studies tended to be either studies in one product area [6,7], or studies of a few "really serious" complaints across a number of product and service categories [5, 13]. The first major study of consumer complaints across many product and service categories in a national sample was the

INITIAL EVALUATION		FINAL EVALUATION	
SUBJECTIVE MEASURE	OBJECTIVE MEASURE	SUBJECTIVE MEASURE	OBJECTIVE MEASURE
<p>MAXIMIZING SATISFACTIONS</p> <p>Simple Satisfaction Scales Ranking of Purchases Salesmen's or Middlemen's Opinions Derived Dissatisfaction Multidimensional Scales</p>	<p>?</p>	<p>Initial Satisfaction Modified By Complaint Satisfaction</p>	<p>Sales Market Share Repeat Purchasing</p>
<p>MINIMIZING DISSATISFACTIONS</p> <p>Negative "Half" of Satisfaction Scales Frequency of Consumer Problems Frequency of Unsolicited Complaints</p>	<p>Frequency of Warranty Claims Frequency of "Objective" Problems or Complaints</p>	<p>Initial Dissatisfaction Modified By Complaint Satisfaction Frequency of Unresolved Problems or Complaints</p>	<p>Switching Out Initial Dissatisfaction Modified By Unresolved "Objective" Problems or Complaints</p>

FIGURE 1.

TAXONOMY OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION/DISSATISFACTION MEASURES

study carried out for Ralph Nader's Center for Study for Responsive Law by Arthur Best and me in 1975 and 1976 [3].

Detailed results of this urban telephone study are reported elsewhere [1, 3]. Highlights are presented in Table 1. The table indicates that of 28,574 purchases in 34 product and service categories made by our 2,419 households, about one in five (20.2%) involved some sort of problem other than price. About half of these non-price problems were volunteered by respondents without a probe, and one half after a probe ("How could this purchase have been better for your household?"). Of all of the problems noted by respondents, about two in five (42.3%) were voiced to business either directly or through complaint handling third parties such as the Federal Trade Commission or the Better Business Bureau.² Problems were much more likely to be voiced if they involved services or infrequently purchased goods (mainly durables like television sets, bicycles, autos, cameras) than frequently purchased goods (mainly convenience goods like groceries, cosmetics and clothing).³ As expected, problems volunteered by respondents were much more likely to have been voiced than those that were not volunteered.

Table 1 about here

Of all problems that were voiced, about three in five (58.9%) were resolved satisfactorily from the consumer's standpoint, an outcome that was more likely with frequently purchased products, with services least often yielding satisfactory results. Finally, when voicing and complaint satisfaction rates are combined in the last row of the table, we can see that only one in four of all problems that U.S. urban consumers perceived were satisfactorily resolved by businesses' complaint handling systems.

Table 1. Summary Data: Consumer Complaints Study

	<u>Infrequently Purchased Products</u>	<u>Frequently Purchased Products</u>	<u>Services</u>	<u>Total</u>
<u>Problems Mentioned Before Probe</u>				
Percent Problems ¹	9.2 (8576)	9.8 (12215)	12.0 (7783)	10.2 (28574)
Percent Voiced ²	62.5 (678)	44.6 (1281)	54.6 (912)	52.0 (2871)
Percent Satis. Results ³	52.4 (372)	65.3 (507)	39.1 (422)	53.1 (1301)
Percent Satis. Resolved Problems ⁴	32.8 (678)	29.1 (1281)	21.3 (912)	27.6 (2871)
<u>Problems Mentioned After Probe</u>				
Percent Problems ¹	9.5 (8576)	11.2 (12215)	8.9 (7783)	10.0 (28574)
Percent Voiced ²	37.6 (740)	26.9 (1409)	38.6 (682)	32.5 (2831)
Percent Satis. Results ³	67.7 (260)	72.8 (357)	60.3 (239)	67.7 (856)
Percent Satis. Resolved Problems ⁴	25.5 (740)	19.6 (1409)	23.3 (682)	22.0 (2831)
<u>All Problems</u>				
Percent Problems ¹	18.7 (8576)	21.0 (12215)	20.9 (7783)	20.2 (28574)
Percent Voiced ^{2,5}	49.5 (1418)	35.3 (2690)	47.7 (1594)	42.3 (5702)
Percent Satis. Results ^{3,5}	58.7 (632)	68.4 (864)	46.7 (661)	58.9 (2157)
Percent Satis. Resolved Problems ⁴	29.1 (1418)	24.1 (2690)	22.3 (1594)	24.9 (5702)

¹Percent of all purchases that resulted in a non-price problem.

²Percent of all non-price problems that were voiced to sellers or to official complaint-handling third parties.

³Percent of all voiced non-price problems that were resolved to the consumer's satisfaction.

⁴Percent of all problems that were voiced and resolved to the consumer's satisfaction.

⁵Includes only problems where existence or absence of probe was known.

Representativeness of Voiced Complaints

As table 1 and the original report from which it was drawn indicate, direct surveys such as the Best/Andreasen study can provide a relatively large amount of basic data on consumer satisfactions and dissatisfactions that, while not without problems, can serve as a useful framework for tracking the performance of the marketing system from the consumers' perspective. While the benefits are clear, an important policy question is: given its significantly greater cost, is such a measurement system economically justified when compared to lower cost measurements of unsolicited complaints already flowing into businesses and government. The issue, of course, turns on the matter of representativeness. If, as suggested by earlier studies, the data are not representative of either types of complaints or types of complainers then they are not a very satisfactory feedback device no matter what their cost. If only certain types of problems are reported to management the system's performance necessarily will become distorted, problems will be ignored and external regulation may become necessary. If on the other hand, management does receive a representative set of problems but not from a representative set of consumers, then while product and service performance may eventually return to equilibrium without external intervention, in the short run one set of consumers will always suffer while others will obtain both the long run benefits of having the system adjust to better meet their needs, and the short run benefit of having their recently voiced complaints resolved satisfactorily (at least 56% of the time).

Complaint Type

We have already noted that certain types of products and services are more likely to generate voiced complaints from consumers. Further analysis of the 34 purchase categories shows that voicing rates range very widely from

71.9 percent of all non-price problems involving dentures and hearing aids to 14.3 percent for cosmetics and toiletries. In general, our data suggest that the more expensive the purchase the more likely a consumer will act upon a complaint, a not particularly surprising result. If voicing is related to the importance of the purchase, it may also be that it is related to the seriousness of the problem. This, of course, would mean that the types of problems management hears are different from those consumers keep to themselves.

Data in Table 2 indicate quite clearly that, indeed, problems consumers voice are very different from problems they do not.⁴ In all three purchase categories, consumers are much more likely to speak up about what we have called manifest problems, those cases where there is not an element of judgement involved, where consumers need merely to present evidence of the problem (e.g. that it is broken or the wrong item) and can reasonably expect management to agree that the problem is legitimate.

Table 2 about here

The data in Table 2 clearly indicate that if managements kept good records on all internally reported complaints (which most do not do now), they would make seriously distorted judgments about consumers' dissatisfactions. For example, a manufacturer of an infrequently purchased product such as a calculator or television set would conclude from internal data that their customers' major problem is partial or total breakage since these complaints represent 40.4 percent of all voiced complaints. Observation of the second column in Table 2, however, shows that the major problems for those who do not voice their complaints

TABLE 2

Voiced and Unvoiced Problems by Problem and Purchase Type

Problem Type	Infrequently Purchased Products ^a			Frequently Purchased Products ^a			Services ^a			All Products ^a		
	Voiced	Not Voiced		Voiced	Not Voiced		Voiced	Not Voiced		Voiced	Not Voiced	
	No.	No.	%	No.	No.	%	No.	No.	%	No.	No.	%
<u>Manifest Problems</u>												
Partial Breakage	279	160	20.1	210	112	4.8	70	42	4.0	559	314	7.5
Total Breakage	87	47	5.9	129	92	3.9	27	9	.9	238	148	3.5
Not Fresh	--	--	--	117	105	4.5	--	--	--	117	105	2.5
Slow, Late, Not Recd.	41	12	1.5	61	34	1.5	137	159	15.3	239	205	4.9
Wrong Item Provided	25	8	1.0	35	11	.5	53	41	3.9	113	60	1.4
Lost Item	*	*	*	*	*	*	41	22	2.1	52	25	.6
Clerical Error	*	*	*	20	14	.6	61	15	1.4	84	29	.7
All Manifest Problems	442	227	28.5	571	371	15.9	389	288	27.7	1402	886	21.1
<u>Judgment Problems</u>												
Poor Workmanship	49	32	4.0	76	204	8.7	173	147	14.2	298	383	9.1
Poor Design	59	156	19.6	72	277	11.8	90	242	23.3	221	675	16.1
Hard to Use	29	50	6.3	7	29	1.2	9	16	1.5	45	95	2.3
Not Durable	50	79	9.9	81	346	14.8	22	12	1.2	153	437	10.4
Poor Materials	6	24	3.0	54	194	8.3	*	*	*	64	227	5.4
Poor Stitching	*	*	*	48	83	3.6	--	--	--	48	83	2.0
Poor Fit	42	31	3.9	46	63	2.7	*	*	*	91	101	2.4
Shrinks, Fades	*	*	*	28	52	2.2	--	--	--	30	54	1.3
Misrepresentation	28	29	3.6	77	166	7.1	37	31	3.0	142	226	5.4
All Judgment Problems	265	403	50.6	489	1414	60.5	338	464	44.7	1092	2281	54.4
<u>Others</u>												
(Not Incl. Price)	212	168	21.1	257	556	23.8	370	302	29.1	839	1026	24.5
All Problems	907	796	100.0	1313	2338	100.0	1090	1038	100.0	3333	4193	100.0

* Less than 10 cases. Included in totals.

^aChi-square probability of independence of voicing and problem type = <.001.

are poor workmanship, poor design and lack of ease of use.

Data in Table 2 indicate that, indeed in each of the three purchase categories in our study, problems voiced to management through letters, comments to sales people and so forth are very different from unvoiced problems. In all three categories, data on what we have called manifest problems are much more likely to be voiced than those on the more equivocal judgmental problems perceived by respondents. Obviously, if management adjusts its product policy solely on the basis of voiced (unsolicited) complaints, it will clearly underemphasize subtle design problems that, in the long run, can have a very serious impact on a brand's market franchise. This also means that in the absence of direct consumer survey data the marketplace will adjust at a level leaving a considerable amount of unnecessary dissatisfaction.

The next question is whether that dissatisfaction is uniformly distributed across the population.

Consumer Complainers

Do those who complain differ significantly from those who do not? In general, the empirical research to date has suggested that the answer is yes, that consumers who complain are younger, or perhaps middle-aged and of higher socio-economic status than those who do not. For example, Mason and Himes [12]. found that those who took action because of their dissatisfaction with an appliance were from larger families, had higher incomes and were more likely to own their own homes. They were more likely to be found in the 30 to 49 age group rather than younger or older. These findings are supported by Liefeld, Edgecombe and Wolfe who found that Canadian complaint letter writers were "the middle-aged, well educated, higher income, managerial/professional and married consumers who complain with much greater frequency

than do other population segments." (11, P. 79).

Further confirmation comes from Miller and from Warland, Herrmann and Willits. The former found complainers to be younger, more mobile and, with better educated spouses [14]; the latter found that those who took action were "better educated, earned higher incomes, were more frequently in the top social classes, were more active in formal organizations and were more politically committed and liberal" (15, p. 153). Finally, Landon and Emory found that the consumer complainers they studied were younger but found that the significance of other characteristics depended on whether a durable, non-durable or service was the source of the problem. Smaller households were more likely to complain about non-durables, men about durables and higher educated households about services [10].

While there is relative unanimity in these past studies, they all suffer from a major weakness; they do not take into account either the specific type of purchase or the type of problem involved. As earlier sections of this paper have indicated, consumers are much more likely to voice a complaint when the purchase is expensive. Thus, it is entirely plausible that higher voicing found for upscale consumers in past studies may simply reflect their taste for more expensive products and services. Further, we have seen that judgment problems are voiced less often than manifest problems. It is possible (although less plausible) that upscale consumers' purchases of expensive products are services means that their purchases are better designed, made of better materials and thus less subject to judgment problems.

The analytic question at hand then is: are voicers of complaints upscale when one controls for purchase category and problem type? Data to answer this question are presented in Table 3 which reports variables

for stepwise discriminant analyses of voicing behavior significant at the .05 level for each of the 34 product and service categories in the Best/Andreasen study. Since variables are listed in the order in which they entered the discriminant function, the analysis permits us to assess not only whether variables significant in past studies are significant when purchase and problem type is considered, but also what the relative importance of these variables is in explaining voicing behavior. (A detailed description of the significant variables is found in Table 4).

Tables 3 and 4 about here

The findings in Table 3 are rather clear cut:

1. Problem type is a much more significant predictor of voicing behavior than are any of the household characteristics. In 22 of 34 purchase categories, the first significant predictor variable is a type of problem.
2. Socio-economic status is not as significant a variable as past research would suggest when purchase type and problem type are part of the analysis. Income, education¹ occupation or a computed SES measure appeared in only 13 of 34 discriminant functions.⁵ However, in five of the 13 cases the sign of the variable was opposite to that predicted by the literature. Social status characteristics were the first household variables entered in only six of these functions and three times they were in the "wrong" direction
3. In general, there is virtually no pattern across the thirty-four categories. Only seven variables appear in the total

TABLE 3
 Significant Predictors of Voicing Behavior
 from Stepwise Discriminant Analysis
 (in order of significance)^a

<u>Purchase (No. of Cases)^b</u>	<u>Variables</u>
<u>Infrequently Purchased Products</u>	
Car (223)	SES, Howpay, Design (-), Complain, Lengthres.
Tires (110)	Breakage, Cproblems
TV Set (88)	Breakage, other (-).
Tape, Stereo (103)	Other, Design (-), Nosay, Complain.
Radio (50)	Age, Clerical, Elecost.
Air Conditioner (29)	Breakage.
Vacuum (79)	Late, Nosay (-), Breakage, Conlaws, Foodlabel.
Washer/Dryer (50)	Design (-), Numpurch, Quality (-), Black (-), Hsldsize
Lamps (22)	Unemp, Cproblems.
Floor Covering (83)	Complain, Breakage.
Calculator (74)	Breakage, Hsldsize.
Camera (54)	Breakage, Lengthres.
Bicycle (88)	Numpurch, Education, Late
Eyeglasses (154)	Bargain, Design (-)
Hearing, Dental (28)	Other (-), Education (-), Nosay, Lengthres
<u>Frequently Purchased Products</u>	
Furniture (144)	Design (-), Other, Upmid.
Blankets (99)	Breakage
Pots, pans (97)	Breakage, Hsldsize
Tools (60)	Breakage, Headyes, Unemp, Citysize (-).
Jewelry (140)	Breakage, Conserv, Jewish, Poor, Bargains.
Toys (284)	Breakage, Howpay, Late, Hsldsize.
Books/Records (167)	Breakage, Completed (-), Demo, Complain
Clothing (512)	Numpurch, Complain, Breakage. Poor (-), Foodlabel.
Cosmetics (151)	Breakage, Jewish, Education, Complain.
Groceries (506)	Breakage, Complain, Upmid, Design (-), Other.
Mail Order (140)	Conactvy
<u>Services</u>	
Car Repair (379)	Service, Howpay, Other, Foodlabel (-).
Home Repair (125)	Poor (-).
Appliance Repair (141)	Service, Design (-), Bargains (-), Upmid (-).
Medical/Dental Care (233)	Headyes (-).
Legal (54)	(None)
Credit (106)	Design (-), Quality (-).
Film Developing (200)	Black (-), Hsldsize.
Car Parking (143)	Citysize

^a.05 level of significance. Description of variables is in Table 4.

^bNumber of cases where some non-price problem was perceived.

TABLE 4
Definition of Variables

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Age	Age
Bargains	Household discusses shopping for bargains
Black	Race is black
Breakage	Problem was total or partial breakage
Citysize	Size of city
Clerical	Clerical occupation
Complain	Respondent and household believes it makes more complaints than other households.
Completd	"Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on". (0 = disagree, 1 = agree).
Conactvy	Number of consumer issues discussed in household.
Conlaws	Household discusses consumer protection laws.
Conserv	Politically conservative
Cproblems	Respondent and household believes it has more problems than other households.
Demo	Democrat
Design	Problem was design.
Education	Education
Elecost	Household discusses the cost of electricity.
Foodlabel	Household discusses food labels.
Headyes	Head of household
Howpay	Method of payment (1 = cash, 2 = one month, 3 = longer payments)
Hsldsize	Size of Household
Jewish	Brought up in Jewish religion
Late	Problem was too slow, late or not received
Lengthres	Length of residence
Nosay	"People like me don't have much say about what the government does". (0 = disagree, 1 = agree).
Numpurch	Number of categories in which purchases were made
Other	Problem was "other"
Poor	Household income is below \$8000
Poorwork	Problem was poor workmanship
Quality	Problem was poor quality
Service	Problem was item not fixed correctly before
SES	Socio-economic status index
Unemp	Unemployed
Upmid	Household income was between \$15,000 and \$25,000.

set of functions more than twice with the same sign.

These variables, and the number of times they appeared, are:

- a. Whether the respondent perceives himself to be a heavy complainer (7)
- b. Household size (5)
- c. Number of purchases (3)
- d. Education (3)
- e. Method of payment (3)
- f. Length of residence (3)
- g. Household discusses food labelling (3)

On the basis of this evidence there do not appear to be grounds for suggesting that certain groups of consumers are systematically excluded from the complaint process across product and service categories. While lower socio-economic status groups apparently voice complaints less often in some categories, this is apparently not a pervasive problem. What seems clear is that whether one talks back to business is not really a function of who one is but rather what one purchased and what the problem was.

Conclusion

These data on consumer dissatisfactions clearly suggest that unsolicited complaints data are inadequate feedback measures for ensuring a market equilibrium minimizing consumer dissatisfactions. While there do not appear to be grounds for arguing that some consumers suffer more than others from market disequilibrium, all consumers may well suffer from the fact that judgmental problems such as those related to product design are underreported to management. The need for superior measurements seems clear for both improved managerial performance and for improved societal welfare. The

taxonomy presented earlier and the methodology used in the present study can, along with the pioneering work of others in this area, provide a useful starting point for the development of such crucial measurements.

Footnotes

¹The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of Professor Arthur Best of Western New England College who was the initiator and field director of this study and co-author of earlier papers on the study's results.

²Only three percent of voiced complaints were transmitted indirectly through complaint handling third parties.

³The latter finding parallels that of Landon and Emery (10). The full list of frequently and infrequently purchased products is included in Table 3.

⁴Voicing of minor problems is overreported to an unknown degree in Table 2 since voicing behavior was attributed to all problems associated with a purchase. In many cases, only one of several problems mentioned to our interviewers may have triggered voicing behavior.

⁵This would rise to fifteen if race were considered to be a measure of socio-economic status.

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