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Why are consumers complaining more?

In an interview with the Editor, Elke den Ouden explained her study into complaints from consumers about products.

Not only are products themselves becoming more complex but so are the environments in which they are used.

Against a background of initiatives to raise quality and shorten time to market, manufacturers of consumer products have found that the number of consumer complaints is rising. While some traditional quality models fail to address the uncertainties inherent in innovative products (products that are not new versions of existing models), the reason for the rise in complaints was not clear. Rather than too little attention to quality or conflicting priorities, it seemed as if other types of problems were causing complaints.

Elke den Ouden's study, which included products from many manufacturers and led to a thesis entitled *Development of a Design Analysis Model for Consumer Complaints*, explored the reasons consumers gave for making complaints and returning products, then proposed a model for analysing the complaints (Figure 1). Although the study did not separate design and documentation issues, this article concentrates on the findings with most relevance to technical communicators seeking to understand consumers' expectations and address them in their instructions for installation and use.

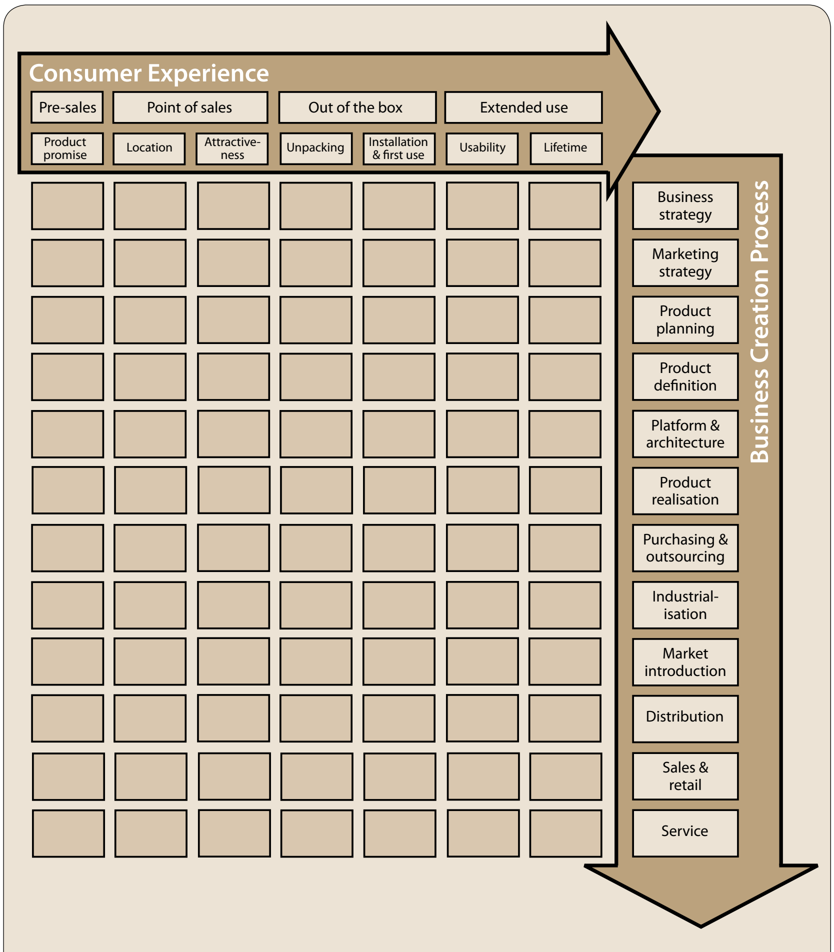

Figure 1. Reference model for analysing consumer complaints

What factors contribute to consumers' problems?

Inaccurate perceptions

The study began with a review of relevant literature. This indicated that consumer complaints fell to an all-time low in the mid-1990s but have since begun to rise. Whereas in the past poor manufacture or faulty components were usually identified, no technical cause is now found for many returns. Quality programmes appear to have resolved the technical issues and yet still consumers are dissatisfied. A suspicion formed that, rather than products failing to meet specifications, the problem is specifications failing to meet consumer's expectations. Put simply, consumers may buy products thinking they do something they do not. For example, someone buying a hard-disk video recorder so they can watch programmes later might misunderstand the time-shift feature. They might expect the recorder to give video on demand, whereas it actually requires them to select a channel in advance to record much like a conventional video recorder.

New products often resemble their predecessors in certain ways, which can make them seem more familiar than they really are. For example, an MP3 player has similar controls to a CD player and consumers do not always appreciate that the underlying technology is more complex.

Such misconceptions can arise at various stages of a new product launch, particularly when the product uses new and therefore unfamiliar technology. To some extent, marketing information is designed to raise expectations and encourage consumers to make new purchases to meet newly identified needs. However, such literature needs to make clear the real nature of new features to reduce the likelihood of potential buyers having unrealistic expectations of the product. More informative marketing could help to develop consumers' knowledge and expectations in a constructive way.

Short adoption cycles

Another issue is that development times for new products have fallen much faster than the time required to gain feedback from their predecessors. This means that feedback from a first-generation product often cannot be applied in the second generation. It may even be too late to be incorporated into the concept for a third generation.

Adoption cycles have also grown shorter. Traditionally, early adopters had a good level of technical awareness but manufacturers cannot depend on that with shorter adoption cycles. Widespread early adoption reduces the opportunities for less knowledgeable consumers to become familiar

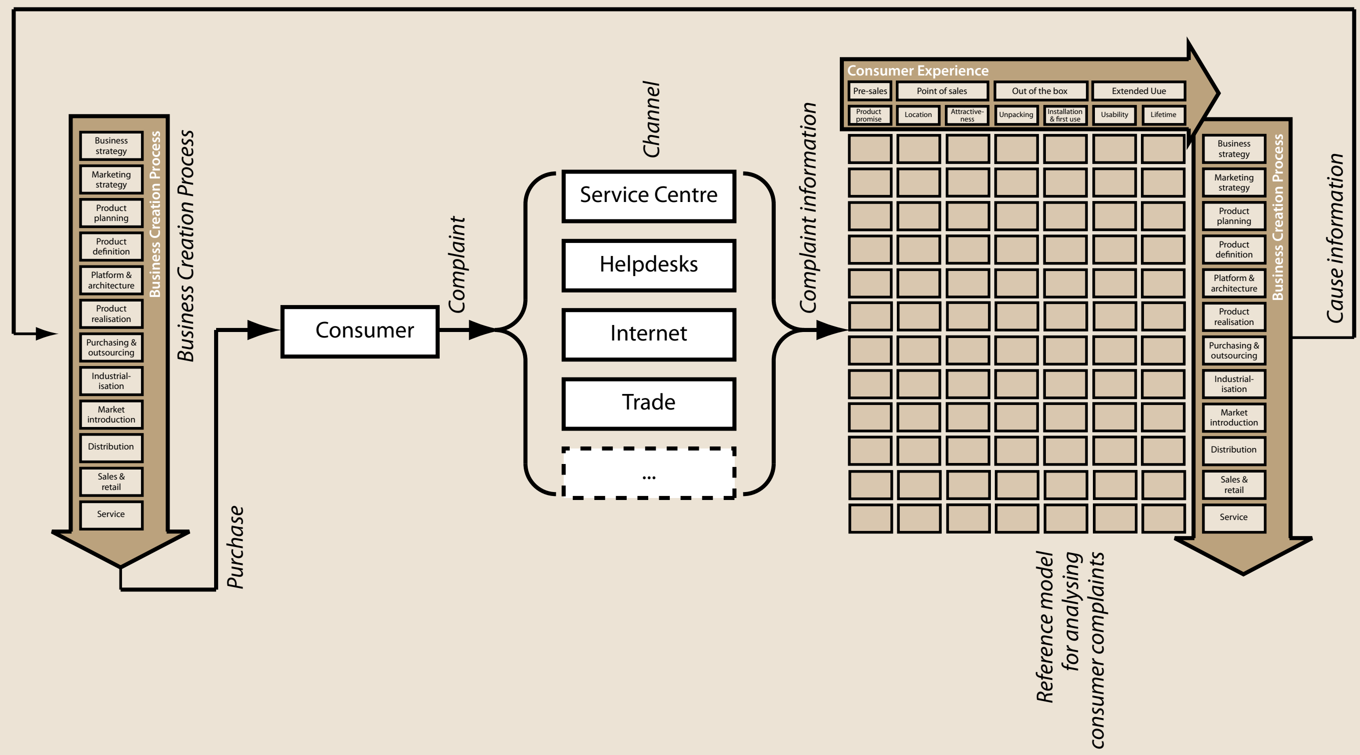
Business strategy
Marketing strategy
Product planning
Product definition
Platform & architecture
Product realisation
Purchasing & outsourcing
Industrialisation
Market introduction
Distribution
Sales & retail
Service
Business Creation Process
Business Creation Process
Purchase
Consumer
Complaint
Channel
Service Centre
Helpdesks
Internet
Trade
...
Complaint information
Consumer Experience
Pre-sales
Point of sales
Out of the box
Extended Uue
Product promise
Location
Attractiveness
Unpacking
Installation & first use
Usability
Lifetime
Business strategy
Marketing strategy
Product planning
Product definition
Platform & architecture
Product realisation
Purchasing & outsourcing
Industrialisation
Market introduction
Distribution
Sales & retail
Service
Business Creation Process
Cause information
Reference model for analysing consumer complaints

Figure 2. Suggested product quality and reliability feedback system

with concepts by exposure to earlier models and to new models used by friends. Consumers from different categories (from innovators to laggards) may complain for different reasons but this has yet to be confirmed by research.

A side-effect of shorter adoption cycles is that products designed for one type of consumer are often used by other types of consumer. So, if a product is designed as a top-of-the-range model for well-informed and demanding consumers but is then launched as a lower priced option for a wider market, both the product and any instructions accompanying it may not take into account the needs of the less knowledgeable consumers.

High complexity

Not only are products themselves becoming more complex but so are the environments in which they are used. For example, the increasingly global nature of markets adds complexity for developers. While aspects such as language and electricity supplies are well understood, issues related to compatibility and interoperability may cause more problems.

Growing demands

Finally, consumers are less tolerant of quality issues. While they may not understand products well enough to appreciate the underlying complexities, they demand extended warranties and no-questions returns policies.

Quality methods falter for innovative designs owing to the difficulty of defining requirements accurately early on. It is hard to establish exactly what consumers will want, without making assumptions that may prove incorrect.

Various methods have been proposed to cope with shorter times to market, for the learning process both within and across projects. Some researchers have noted that classical methods do not fit and have proposed more iterative methods. Some have suggested that traditional methods work better for services than for physical products.

What was the study aim?

Having identified that existing methods cannot adequately address these problem areas, the study sought an adaptive approach that would offer a better fit. The idea was to divide what were traditionally classed as 'failure not found' complaints into various categories of non-technical problems.

In the past, problems tended to be analysed on the basis of the technical specification. If no fault was found with the product, complaints might be seen as invalid and disregarded — even though the consumer perceived a real issue. While companies have to accept a certain number of complaints and returns as inevitable (from consumers who change their minds or lack the skills to operate products of the type chosen), genuine complaints from consumers with average levels of competence should not be ignored.

Traditional business creation models have not made enough use of the time when the product is on the market and in use to feed information into the next development cycle. The cycle was not well formed, with needs identified from

Elke den Ouden is Managing Consultant in product innovation at Philips Applied Technologies and an Assistant Professor in the faculty of Technology Management at Eindhoven University of Technology. This article discusses her PhD thesis. She has authored and co-authored more than ten academic publications on product quality in new product development. W: www.apptech.philips.com and www.tm.tue.nl.