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# Firms' complaint handling policies and consumer complaint voicing

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of actions recommended by researchers for firms to encourage complaint voicing, and test the proposition that complaining by dissatisfied consumers would increase if only firms would make it easier to complain.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An experimental study assessed consumer reactions to scenarios in which a retailer made it easier or harder to complain by varying its refund policy, employee empowerment, access to call center representatives, and in-store hassles to return merchandise. Consumers in an online panel completed questionnaires measuring perceived effort, likelihood of success, and complaint intentions.

**Findings** – Complaint-friendly policies produced perceptions of lower anticipated difficulty and increased chances of successful redress. However, only lenient refund policy significantly influenced complaint voicing intentions. While most policies designed to make complaining easier had limited impact on complaint voicing, measured perceptions of complaint difficulty were significant predictors of complaining intentions.

**Research limitations/implications** – In future studies, researchers should examine these variables in non-retail settings where getting a refund does not dominate the consumer's decision to voice a complaint.

**Practical implications** – The results call into question the proposition that complaint voicing would increase if only firms would make complaining easier. Managers should focus on assuring customers of liberal refund policies if they complain.

**Originality/value** – By focusing on actions that the firm can undertake to improve the probability of consumer complaining, this paper departs from the literature on antecedents of complaining behavior, which has focused on individual difference factors that affect the probability of complaining, variables that lie outside managerial control.

**Keywords** Complaints, Consumer behaviour, Customer satisfaction

**Paper type** Research paper

**An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.**

## Introduction

When dissatisfied consumers fail to tell management about something that went wrong, the firm stands to lose. Those who do not complain often simply disappear, defecting to competitors, spreading negative word-of-mouth to friends and family members, and denying the firm an opportunity to correct mistakes it will probably repeat.

Consequently, firms have tried to encourage customers to voice their complaints directly to frontline employees. Sheraton Hotels, for example, devised a program where guests received cash payments for informing management about problems, and employees were authorized to offer discounts, points, or other amenities to customers who complained (Paterik, 2002).

Despite such efforts, surprisingly little progress has been made toward increasing the proportion of dissatisfied customers who voice complaints. When Best and Andreasen (1977) and Day *et al.* (1981) published the first systematic investigations of customer complaining behavior, they found

that only a small proportion of dissatisfied purchasers voiced complaints. Years later, studies of complaining behavior continued to report that few dissatisfied customers complain directly to sellers. For example, a study by TARP showed that over 70 percent of the customers experiencing service failures did not complain (TARP, 1996). More recently, The Retail Customer Dissatisfaction Study (2006) reported that only 6 percent of consumers who experienced a problem told the firm about it. Similar results have been obtained outside the United States: in a Norwegian study of customer satisfaction Andreassen (2001) found that 68 percent of dissatisfied consumers did not complain.

Why has it been so difficult to get dissatisfied customers to speak up?

Cost-benefit theory suggests that before making a complaint, dissatisfied consumers examine a tradeoff. They must anticipate whether their actions will yield positive outcomes, and even if it appears that their complaints would succeed in achieving redress, consumers must assess whether it would be worth the extra effort to go through the firm's complaint handling process (e.g., Blodgett *et al.*, 1993a; Day, 1984; Hirschman, 1970; Kowalski, 1996; Richins, 1979). Within the cost-benefit framework, consumers make a mental judgment of "worth it" or "not worth it," based on their simultaneous assessment of the probability of success, the effort required to complain, and the value of the product involved, three factors first suggested by Hirschman (1970). Many dissatisfied consumers conclude that complaining is not worth the effort, so they choose other means of dealing with their unhappiness. But if complaining became easier and/or redress became more certain, consumers may be more likely to speak up.

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While managers have little or no control over most antecedents of individual consumers' complaining decisions, they do control their own complaint handling policies, and by formulating either lenient or restrictive policies, firms signal that it is easy (or difficult) to complain, and that success is likely (or unlikely). As a result, some important firm-level questions emerge:

- 1 Can firms reduce the dissatisfied consumer's costs (time and effort) by adopting procedures to reduce barriers to complaining?
- 2 Can firms' complaint handling policies produce expectations of successful outcomes?
- 3 By implementing complaint handling policies that reduce costs and/or increase expectations of success, can firms increase the frequency of complaint voicing?

By focusing on actions that the firm can undertake to improve the cost-benefit assessment of pre-complaint consumers, this paper departs from the literature on antecedents of complaining behavior, which has focused on individual difference factors that affect the probability of complaining, variables that lie outside managerial control (e.g., Chebat *et al.*, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2003; Richins, 1982; Voorhees and Brady, 2005). In this paper we briefly review the literature on the costs and benefits of voicing complaints. We then report the results of an experimental study that explores dissatisfied customers' perceptions of costs and benefits associated with complaining, and investigate the effects of these variables on their behavioral intentions.

### Benefits

Every customer who initiates a complaint expects some outcome to result from it. The perceived likelihood of obtaining justice has long been recognized as an important determinant of complaint voicing (e.g., Blodgett and Anderson, 2000; Blodgett *et al.*, 1993a; Day, 1984). The dissatisfied customer's decision to voice a complaint rather than defecting to a competitor depends, in part, on his/her estimation of the probability of achieving a positive outcome.

To our knowledge no studies have linked the complaint handling policies and actions of firms with consumer expectations of success. Blodgett and Anderson (2000, pp. 323-4), for example, use store type as a proxy for likelihood of success, reasoning that discount firms like Wal-Mart have more liberal return policies than department or specialty stores, but acknowledging that "purely on intuition, it is posited that dissatisfied customers will be more likely to perceive a high likelihood of success when the focal product was purchased at a discount store". This leaves a gap in our knowledge of what kinds of actions by firms will lead to consumer perceptions of high likelihood of success.

Investigations of actions firms can take after dissatisfied customers have voiced complaints have focused on reactions to offending firms' recovery attempts (Andreassen, 2001; Blodgett *et al.*, 1993b; Estelami, 2000; Homburg and Furst, 2005; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Tax *et al.*, 1998). This research has demonstrated that effective service recovery can positively impact corporate image and customer repurchase intentions and loyalty, though some question remains as to whether even the best recovery efforts can completely remedy the negative after-effects of initial service failures (Andreassen, 1999; McCollough *et al.*, 2000). In any event, firms have an uneven track record recovering from failures:

Andreassen (2001) found that 40 percent of the dissatisfied consumers who complained about service failures were subsequently dissatisfied with the firms' handling of their complaints. These studies, while focusing on variables that produce positive post-complaint responses among dissatisfied consumers, inform our understanding of actions firms can take to more effectively promise a higher likelihood of success before they complain. Davidow (2003) concluded that firms can most effectively deal with complaints by offering redress (compensation). Applying this to the pre-complaint decision faced by a dissatisfied consumer, we hypothesize the following:

*H1a.* The perceived likelihood of complaint success will be greater for firms whose Refund policy is lenient than firms whose policy is restrictive.

*H1b.* Dissatisfied consumers will be more likely to voice complaints to firms whose Refund policy is lenient than firms whose policy is restrictive.

Singh (1988) developed a taxonomy of customer complaining behaviors, drawing a distinction between public and private voicing of complaints. Among public voicing actions, consumers can choose to complain directly to the firm or to a third party, such as the Better Business Bureau (BBB), governmental regulators, or law enforcement agencies. Empirically, Singh (1990) discovered that these behaviors were distinct and independent, and firms instruct managers to encourage complaints in part to avoid having dissatisfied customers take their complaints to outside third parties. Thus, by offering redress, firms should expect customers to be less likely contact third parties.

*H1c.* Dissatisfied consumers will be less likely to voice complaints to third parties when the store's Refund policy is lenient.

### Costs

It takes work to complain. In most cases, a dissatisfied customer must take the initiative to contact the seller, explain the problem, hope that the representative will accept the explanation, and arrange for an acceptable resolution. Researchers have proposed several methods to mitigate the effort to complain, including toll-free telephone numbers, instructional literature, signs at point of service, and internet websites (Davidow and Dacin, 1997; Kim *et al.*, 2003; Tax and Brown, 1998). Yet it is not clear whether these methods are sufficient to produce increases in the percentage of consumers who complain. Kolodinsky (1993) found that improving access to a firm's representatives was a marginally significant ( $p < 0.10$ ) predictor of consumer complaining in a healthcare setting. However, Owens and Hausknecht (1999) found that by simplifying the complaint process, customers were significantly more likely to return complaint forms.

Though largely ignored in empirical research, costs have been included in theoretical models of consumer complaining behavior (Huppertz, 2003; Kowalski, 1996). Hirschman (1970) posited that the cost of voicing is greater than the cost of exit, thereby depressing the rate of voicing. Extending this logic, Richins (1982) created Guttman scales of consumers' alternative responses to dissatisfaction in an attempt to measure them along a single, quantitative dimension. The behaviors ranged from mild (e.g., not leaving a tip at a restaurant) to extreme (writing a complaint letter to a business). Similarly, Bearden and Teel

(1983, p. 24) developed a Guttman scale to “reflect increasing intensity of complaint actions”. If, as Richins (1983) suggests, complaining directly to the seller requires a great deal of effort compared to other behavioral responses, voicing should be relatively infrequent among dissatisfied customers – and it is.

Through their product return and complaint handling policies, firms can actually *increase* the difficulty of voicing complaints (Bechwati and Siegal, 2005; Boshoff, 1997; Wirtz and Kum, 2004). Davis *et al.* (1998) suggest that firms can maximize their profits by creating the optimal level of “hassle” for customers to return goods – that is, making the process more difficult by requiring receipts, issuing store credit versus cash refunds, and/or giving consumers partial credit. Other tactics to deter complaints include understaffing customer service desks, making customers fill out forms, requiring managers' approvals, charging restocking fees, applying shipping charges, and refusing to accept returns (Davis *et al.*, 1998; Hess *et al.*, 1996). While these tactics are intended to prevent abuse of firms' “satisfaction guaranteed or your money back” policies, they can also discourage customers from voicing legitimate complaints.

On the other hand, firms can implement complaint handling policies that make it easier for consumers to voice complaints. Using guidance from the complaining behavior and service research literature, we propose that three actions will lower the cost and increase the probability of complaint voicing by dissatisfied consumers: Employee Empowerment, Accessibility, and Hassle.

#### *Employee empowerment*

The ability of frontline employees to resolve customer problems is important for effective complaint handling (Chebat and Kollias, 2000; Homburg and Furst, 2005). Empowerment means employees have authority to apply remedies, and customers are more satisfied with companies' service recovery when frontline employees handle complaints on their own, including offers of compensation (Bitner, 1990; Tax and Brown, 1998). From an effort perspective, dealing with an employee who is empowered to resolve complaints will be easier than having to wait for that employee to call a supervisor, re-explain the problem, and resolve it. Thus we hypothesize:

- H2a.* Empowerment of employees to handle complaints will increase dissatisfied consumers' perceptions of the ease of voicing complaints.
- H2b.* Empowerment of employees to handle complaints will increase dissatisfied consumers' intentions to voice complaints directly to the store.

#### *Hassle*

Requiring that customers fill out forms or provide information to the seller helps discourage consumers from returning goods (Davis *et al.*, 1998). The amount of time and effort the customer must devote to this task is inversely related to the amount of time company personnel must devote to it, so by having frontline employees complete necessary forms and paperwork for the customer, the firm effectively invests resources into the relationship with him/her. Thus, we predict the following:

- H3a.* Imposing a Hassle will decrease dissatisfied consumers' perceptions of the ease of voicing complaints.
- H3a.* Imposing a Hassle will decrease dissatisfied consumers' intentions to voice complaints.

#### *Accessibility*

Both Empowerment and Hassle pertain to onsite complaint handling. Several authors recommend that firms establish call centers with toll-free 800 numbers to receive customer complaints, interact personally with customers, and handle problems immediately (Davidow and Dacin, 1997; Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1988; Tax and Brown, 1998). Accessibility implies that the customer can reach someone to handle the complaint.

*H4a.* Accessibility to firms' call center customer service personnel will increase dissatisfied consumers' perceptions of the ease of voicing complaints.

*H4a.* Accessibility to firms' call center customer service personnel will increase dissatisfied consumers' intentions to voice complaints.

Cost-benefit theory suggests that as the anticipated benefits decrease and the anticipated costs increase for a given behavior, it is less likely to be chosen and alternative courses of action will be taken (Bettnan *et al.*, 1990). In a complaining context, this implies that if one avenue toward achieving redress is blocked, the next least difficult route will be selected. Some firms provide complaint handling through both in-store and call center facilities, giving them an additional channel for voicing. If a retailer makes its call center easily accessible while making it difficult to handle the problem in the store, consumers may choose the call center to voice complaints. Therefore, the effect of Accessibility on consumers' perceptions of complaint difficulty and their intentions to complain to the call center may be moderated by the Hassle that the store imposes on the customer:

*H5a.* Accessibility to the firm's call center will increase dissatisfied customers' perceptions of the ease of voicing complaints when the store imposes a Hassle on customers in-store.

*H5b.* Accessibility to the firm's call center will increase dissatisfied customers' intentions to voice complaints to the call center when the store imposes a Hassle in-store.

## **Method**

An experiment was conducted, using a 2 (Refund policy) × 2 (Empowerment) × 2 (Hassle) × 2 (Accessibility) between-subjects design. A role-playing scenario procedure was used, in order to control for variability of failure intensity and to reduce common biases known to occur with retrospective self-reports and critical incident techniques (Gremler, 2004). Respondents evaluated a written scenario description of a product that failed to meet expectations after purchasing it at a retail store. A product failure scenario was chosen because in satisfaction research, product problems are cited most often as causing consumer dissatisfaction (Estelami, 2000; Kelley *et al.*, 1994).

## **Sample**

The sample consisted of 338 consumers from a commercial marketing research firm's online consumer panel, a representative sample of USA adults. Their average age was 42.0 years; 49 percent of the sample was female, 51 percent male; 41.7 percent were college graduates; and the mean annual household income was approximately \$60,000. Participants received points toward gifts for their



cooperation in the study as part of their involvement with the panel research.

### Procedure and measures

Scenarios involved two levels of Refund Policy (lenient or restrictive), two levels of Employee Empowerment (authorized to handle problems on the spot vs. needing manager's approval for everything), two levels of Hassle (required customers to complete forms vs no forms required), and two levels of Accessibility (company had an 800 number answered by a live person vs. an address the customer could write to). These scenarios were developed from pilot studies among convenience samples of MBA students, healthcare workers, and bank employees. Pretesting showed that high and low levels of each condition significantly differed on measures of Refund likelihood, Hassle, Empowerment, and Accessibility. The core consumer experience was described as follows:

Imagine that you bought a backpack at a local store. It was fairly expensive, but it's a high quality brand and you got it on sale. After using it for a few weeks, you realize you don't like it as much as you expected, and the more you use it, the less you like it. It is not very comfortable and it's beginning to hurt.

The scenario was derived from a qualitative pilot study in which participants were asked to give an example of a critical incident where they had been "on the fence" regarding whether to complain about a good or service they purchased, having been dissatisfied but wondering if complaining was "worth it".

The manipulated scenarios that created Refund, Empowerment, Accessibility and Hassle conditions appear in Table I.

**Table I** Scenarios used to create experimental conditions

Variable	Description
	<i>High levels of each variable</i>
Refund	Their policy says that even items bought on sale can be returned for a refund or replacement
Empowerment	They have staff who can handle customer problems on the spot without the manager's approval
Hassle	For returnable merchandise, you don't have to explain anything or fill out any forms - they accept it, no questions asked
Accessibility	The company has a toll-free 800 number that you can call if you have a complaint, and you get a live person who is authorized to handle your problem, not an automated voice-mail system
	<i>Low levels of each variable</i>
Refund	Their policy says that if you buy something on sale, it cannot be returned for any reason
Empowerment	They have staff who can handle customer problems, but they need the manager's approval for just about everything
Hassle	In order to get a refund, you have to explain why you are returning the product, and fill out a form giving your name and phone number
Accessibility	The company has an address you can write to if you have a problem

Surveys were hosted on the marketing research firm's secure website, and a random sample of panel members was invited to participate via e-mail; only invited panel members were allowed access to the survey, which required passwords for entry.

Scale items were adapted from prior research studies of consumer satisfaction and complaining behavior. On five-point scales, consumers rated their likelihood to:

- return the product and complain about the problem you had with it;
- write or call the company to complain about the problem; and
- complain to outside agencies.

Two items measured likelihood of success, and two items measured the perceived ease of complaining.

### Results

Analyses of variance were conducted separately on likelihood of success and anticipated effort measures, and the results are presented in Table II. A significant main effect on likelihood of success was found for Refund Policy, supporting *H1a*; consumers rated their chances of success significantly higher when the firm's Refund Policy was lenient. Significant main effects were found for Empowerment, Hassle, and Accessibility on ease of complaining, supporting *H2a*, *H3a*, and *H4a*. Consumers perceived complaining to be significantly easier when they expected Empowered employees authorized to handle problems without managerial approval, when they did not expect a Hassle, and when the firm promised an Accessible customer service staff.

A significant main effect was found for Refund Policy on ease of complaining; and significant main effects were found for Empowerment and Hassle on likelihood of success. These differences were not hypothesized, and the findings demonstrate that although likelihood of success and ease of complaining are conceptually distinct, they are empirically linked: the correlation between these two measures was significant ( $r = 0.70$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

A significant two-way interaction was found between Hassle and Accessibility for ease of complaining, confirming *H5a* (see Figure 1). When the firm imposed a Hassle and offered low Accessibility, consumers perceived a higher level of effort required ( $F(1, 166) = 8.759$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ) compared to the condition in which the firm offered high Accessibility. However, when the firm did not impose a Hassle, the effect of Accessibility disappeared ( $F's < 1$ , ns).

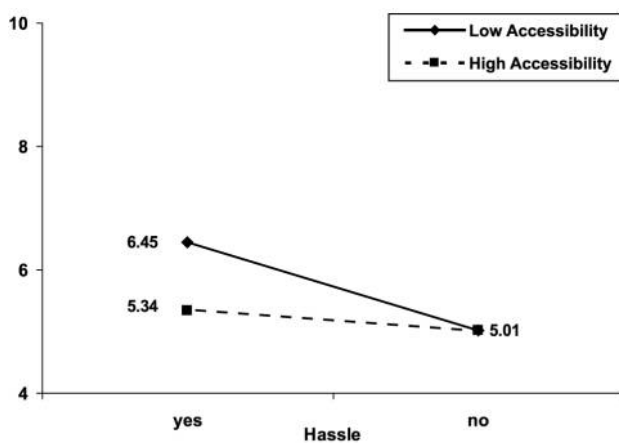
Complaint intentions were significantly greater when consumers expected a lenient Refund Policy, supporting *H1b*. *H1c* was also supported, as consumers expecting a lenient Refund Policy were significantly less likely to complain to a third party than customers expecting a restrictive Refund Policy (see Table III).

*H2b*, *H3b*, and *H4b* were not supported. Accessibility, Empowerment, and Hassle had no significant impact on consumer intentions to voice complaints, to contact the company, or to complain to a third party.

The results reveal a significant three-way interaction between Refund, Hassle, and Accessibility (see Figure 2). The consumers' intentions to contact the company were significantly greater when the firm did not impose a Hassle,

Table II Effects of firm-controlled variables on anticipated success and complaint ease

	Likelihood of success		Ease of complaining	
	F	p	F	p
Refund	46.369	0.000	128.883	0.000
Empower	6.886	0.009	18.884	0.000
Hassle	5.307	0.022	16.608	0.000
Accessibility	1.761	0.185	5.076	0.025
Refund × Empower	0.183	0.669	0.010	0.919
Refund × Hassle	0.086	0.770	0.057	0.811
Empower × Hassle	0.101	0.751	0.035	0.853
Refund × Empower × Hassle	0.101	0.750	0.443	0.506
Refund × Accessibility	0.244	0.622	0.005	0.943
Empower × Accessibility	0.906	0.342	2.280	0.132
Refund × Empower × Accessibility	0.024	0.877	0.500	0.480
Hassle × Accessibility	4.898	0.028	5.552	0.019
Refund × Hassle × Accessibility	0.002	0.969	0.988	0.321
Empower × Hassle × Accessibility	2.766	0.097	1.103	0.294
Refund × Empower × Hassle × Accessibility	0.284	0.594	0.740	0.390

Figure 1 Mean ease of complaining as a function of accessibility and hassle<sup>a</sup>

Note: <sup>a</sup> Higher numbers indicate greater ease of voicing complaints

when Accessibility was high, and when the Refund Policy was lenient ( $F(1, 81) = 10.484, p < 0.002$ ). In all other conditions, no significant differences were found between the mean intentions to contact the company. The moderating effect of "Hassle" occurred in the opposite direction from that predicted in *H5b*, suggesting that consumers feel they can achieve redress only when Refund Policy, Hassle, and Accessibility align in their favor.

The finding that firm-controlled factors designed to make it easier to complain (Accessibility, Hassle, and Empowerment) had no influence on complaint voicing intentions was surprising. This implies that while perceived likelihood of success drives consumer complaint voicing, anticipated effort does not. However, it was not clear whether anticipated effort does not drive complaining or whether the experimental conditions, while effective at producing perceptions of ease/difficulty, were not strong enough to influence consumers' actual complaint intentions. Consequently, we conducted a

least-squares regression of complaint intentions on the participants' perceptions of likelihood of success and anticipated effort after controlling for the experimental conditions, and the results are presented in Table IV. Two sets of variables were analyzed in a nested model: the first set included experimental conditions, and the second set included the measures of likelihood of success and anticipated effort.

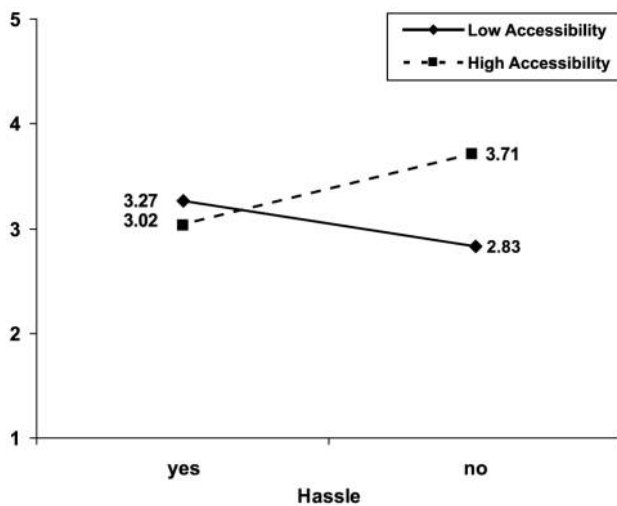
The measured perceptions of likelihood of success and anticipated effort were significant predictors of consumers' intentions to voice complaints to the store, to the company, and to third parties, supporting the notion that perceptions of anticipated effort influenced dissatisfied consumers' intentions to voice complaints. Refund Policy regression coefficients changed signs for different complaining behaviors, indicating that when customers expect a lenient Refund Policy, they are more likely to complain directly to the store, but when they expect a restrictive Refund Policy, they are more likely to contact the company or to complain to a third party.

## Discussion

This study tested the impact of policies and procedures that had been previously recommended by service researchers in conceptual and empirical papers on complaining behavior, service failure and recovery. The results indicate that a firm's policy to provide refunds for returned goods effectively produced the expectancy that complaining would result in a higher likelihood of success. The findings also supported *H1b*, which predicted that by implementing a lenient refund policy the firm would achieve higher levels of intentions to voice complaints. Furthermore, if the firm established a lenient refund policy, it reduced the probability that consumers would complain to the company's call center or to a third party. These results are consistent with Singh's (1990) findings, which showed that consumers tend to choose one particular complaining behavior over another. However, the present study extends Singh's framework by demonstrating that a firm can influence these complaining behaviors by altering its refund policies.

Table III Effects of firm-controlled variables on complaining

	Return and complain		Contact company		Complain to third party	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Refund	11.269	0.001	15.536	0.000	19.877	0.000
Empower	0.056	0.814	0.452	0.502	1.602	0.207
Hassle	0.015	0.903	0.720	0.397	1.459	0.228
Accessibility	1.566	0.212	3.328	0.069	0.128	0.721
Refund × Empower	0.008	0.927	1.079	0.300	1.010	0.316
Refund × Hassle	0.012	0.914	0.013	0.908	0.223	0.637
Empower × Hassle	0.519	0.472	0.429	0.513	0.212	0.646
Refund × Empower × Hassle	0.284	0.594	0.296	0.587	2.113	0.147
Refund × Accessibility	0.037	0.848	0.255	0.614	1.196	0.275
Empower × Accessibility	0.619	0.432	0.006	0.939	3.295	0.070
Refund × Empower × Accessibility	0.063	0.802	1.387	0.240	2.392	0.123
Hassle × Accessibility	1.208	0.272	1.495	0.222	1.347	0.247
Refund × Hassle × Accessibility	0.010	0.921	7.442	0.007	2.365	0.125
Empower × Hassle × Accessibility	1.214	0.271	1.458	0.228	0.880	0.349
Refund × Empower × Hassle × Accessibility	3.314	0.070	0.750	0.387	0.060	0.806

Figure 2 Intention to contact firm as a function of accessibility and hassle: lenient refund policy<sup>a</sup>

Note: <sup>a</sup> Higher numbers indicate greater intentions to contact the firm

The results also showed that consumers perceive complaining as easier when firms implement specific policies designed to reduce the time and effort required to complain. Empowering employees, reducing the hassle involved in returning goods, and providing access customer service representatives resulted in perceptions that voicing complaints would be significantly easier. However, while these actions reduced the perceived effort required to complain, they did not affect participants' complaining intentions, contradicting the conventional wisdom in service research that complaint voicing would increase if only firms would make the task easier to perform. Yet least-squares regression analysis showed that *perceived* ease of complaining predicted complaint voicing intentions, suggesting that effort-related factors not controlled by the firm may drive the probability of voicing complaints. Thus,

individual and situational differences matter, perhaps more than firms' attempts to lower costs of voicing. Researchers have consistently found that personality and attitudinal factors influence complaining behavior (Chebat *et al.*, 2005), but these variables lie outside managerial control and have not been linked to complaint voicing effort. In addition, situational differences may affect the amount of effort that individual consumers must invest in order to complain. For example, someone who lives a few minutes away from a store would find it easier to return dissatisfactory merchandise than someone who must travel an hour to get there.

The effects of a firm's complaint handling policies on complaint voicing intentions may have been attenuated because consumers have become accustomed to the hassles required to complain. For example, if the firm's policy requires managerial approval for refunds, the process would probably take only a few extra minutes, so while it's more difficult, it does not pose too great an obstacle. This suggests that to significantly reduce barriers to complaining firms may have to go to beyond empowering employees and not requiring paperwork.

### Limitations

Several limitations to this study must be considered, and they may help explain the failure to find significant effects of effort-related manipulations on complaint voicing intentions. First, only one setting was used, a retail store, in which the relative importance of the outcome (i.e. desire to get a refund) may have overwhelmed all other factors in consumers' decision-making (Mohr and Bitner, 1995). In other settings, likelihood of achieving redress through refunds is not as dominant in the consumer's decision to voice a complaint.

Second, although the firm's effort-reducing policies did not affect complaint voicing, consumers' perceptions of the ease/difficulty of complaining did have a significant impact. Thus, while anticipated effort is important for predicting consumer complaining behavior, the link between perceived effort and complaint voicing intentions was not determined by the experimentally manipulated factors. Other factors not included in the model caused the observed variation in

Table IV Regression of complaining intentions on likelihood of success and anticipated effort

	Return product and complain		Contact company		Complain to third party	
	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$
(Intercept)		3.30**		2.35*		6.41**
<i>Experimental factors</i>						
Refund policy	0.134	-2.28*	0.239	4.01**	0.193	3.16**
Employee empowerment	0.004	0.08	0.024	0.46	0.085	1.59
Hassle	0.006	0.11	0.035	0.68	0.083	1.55
Accessibility	0.060	1.20	0.088	1.73	0.009	0.16
<i>Measured perceptions</i>						
Likelihood of success	0.514	7.38**	0.426	6.00**	0.257	3.53**
Difficulty of complaining	0.251	3.20**	0.227	2.84**	0.264	3.21**
Adjusted $R^2$	0.168		0.151		0.088	

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$

perceptions of complaint ease/difficulty which then predicted complaint voicing intentions. It is possible that perceived effort serves as a mediator between individual difference variables and complaining behavior; prior complaining behavior research has linked variables such as attitudes toward complaining, past experience, social norms, and consumer sophistication to complaint voicing (Chebat *et al.* 2005; Richins, 1982; Stephens and Gwinner, 1998; Voorhees and Brady, 2005). Whether these factors can be influenced by managerial actions is uncertain, and future research should address the problem of examining the complex interaction between firm-initiated actions, individual differences, and perceptions of effort in complaining behavior. This is extremely important in view of service researchers' strong recommendations that firms should do all they can to encourage complaints from dissatisfied consumers.

### Managerial implications

Many authors have recommended that firms implement effective complaint handling procedures in order to regain customer satisfaction, reduce negative word-of-mouth, increase repurchase intentions, and improve company image (Davidow, 2003); yet when the need arises to notify the firm about something that went wrong, many consumers dread the task. Practitioners argue and research findings support the notion that managers should encourage customers to voice their complaints directly to the firm. Complaining gives management an opportunity both to remedy specific problems that are episodic and limited to the individual incident, and to correct systemic problems that affect many individuals throughout the firm's customer base.

This study's findings should prompt both researchers and managers to question the proposition that by simply establishing policies and procedures that remove barriers to customer complaining, customers will voice their dissatisfaction. However, the findings strongly suggest that firms should establish lenient refund policies and make them known to customers. Lenient Refund Policy drives consumers' expectations of successful redress and their likelihood of voicing complaints.

The study results were also consistent with prior research findings that consumers who do not expect to find satisfaction through complaining to the firm are more likely to turn to third parties outside the customer-firm relationship, an action

that most managers would wish to avoid. This further reinforces the need for firms to offer viable avenues for voicing complaints.

### Conclusion

Even the best complaint handling procedures will not result in a positive result for the firm if consumers fail to voice complaints. Although prior research has addressed complaint handling and service recovery actions of firms after consumers have complained, there have been very few attempts to uncover specific actions by firms that will encourage their voicing behavior. In this study, we cast several recommended strategies in a cost-benefit theoretical framework to make predictions about complaint voicing by dissatisfied customers, demonstrating that while benefits and costs do predict consumer complaining behavior, improving benefits (lenient refund policies) are more powerful than reducing costs (ease of complaining).

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## Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

*This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.*

There are significant implications if dissatisfied customers fail to voice their disapproval to the organization concerned. Such customers often transfer their business to a rival and engage in negative word-of-mouth publicity about the company they leave behind. And not alerting an organization to its mistakes increases the likelihood of similar shortcomings in the future.

### Why it's good to talk

Many companies therefore encourage consumers to voice their complaints directly to them so that such unwelcome consequences can be minimized or avoided. However, their efforts have so far gone largely unrewarded. Various studies in the USA and elsewhere have indicated that the vast majority of dissatisfied customers remain likely to take alternative courses of action, which can include complaining to outside agencies.

Why are customers reluctant to take their complaint to the company involved? According to one theory, customers weigh up the possibility of achieving a satisfactory outcome against the effort needed to make the complaint. Research has indicated that many voice their disapproval via other means because they feel that submitting a complaint demands too much effort of their part. But evidence also suggests that consumers may be likelier to contact the company involved if the complaints process is straightforward and reparation is the expected outcome. Customer perception of the probability of a satisfactory result will influence the decision about whether or not to complain.

Rather than introducing measures to simplify the process, complicating the matter further would appear to be the aim of some firms. Demanding purchase receipts, forcing customers to complete paperwork, favoring store credit over cash refunds, having an insufficient number of customer service staff on duty, and requiring management to sanction decisions are just some of the tactics employed towards this end. Such actions might serve to uphold profits but dissuading customers from submitting genuine complaints is an equally probable consequence.

Customers are invariably forced to initiate complaints themselves and researchers have suggested measures that a company can implement to simplify the process. These measures include freephone contact numbers, written information, signs at service areas, and websites. However, investigations have so far proved inconclusive as to whether this would be enough to persuade more customers to complain.

### Making complaining easier

To date, the cost (time and effort) involved in complaining has been largely overlooked. Huppertz supports the idea that helping to reduce the cost could increase the likelihood of disgruntled customers taking their grievances directly to the company concerned and suggesting concentrating on:

- Employee empowerment. Granting frontline workers total authority to handle and resolve complaints is known to be an important factor. Dealing with a single person who can settle the issue makes life much easier for the customer.
- Hassle. Research has indicated that requiring customers to fill out forms or provide detailed information discourages them from returning goods. Therefore, engaging frontline employees in activities to reduce any such hassle demonstrates a company's willingness to invest into the relationship with its clients.
- Accessibility. Several authors recommend that firms should have designated call centers where customers can get their complaints handled quickly and efficiently. Using a freephone number, customers should be able to readily access someone able to deal with their concerns.

It has also been suggested that customers may opt for the next best option if perceived costs outweigh perceived benefits. Analysts believe that customers will select the option that presents fewer difficulties. Some organizations appear to recognize this and provide the customer with the choice to complain either in-store or via the call center.

The author devised hypotheses based around these factors and conducted an experiment using a role-play procedure. The experiment invited 338 respondents from an online consumer research panel in the USA to evaluate different written scenarios relating to a product that failed to meet customer expectations.

Scenarios included different combinations of company refund policy, employee empowerment, hassle and accessibility. Two alternatives were possible for each of these factors. Study participants expressed their likelihood of returning the product and submitting their complaint about it in store, contacting the company via telephone or letter, or complaining to outside agencies.

Findings indicated that:

- A company's refund policy may be especially significant. Consumers rated their chance of success much higher when the refund policy was lenient. There was also increased intention to complain direct to the firm and a lower likelihood of contacting third parties than when a restrictive refund policy was in place.
- Complaining was perceived as considerably easier when employees have the authority to resolve issues without need for managerial endorsement, when hassle is minimized and when access to customer service staff is good.

- A significant two-way relationship exists between hassle and accessibility. When the customer is faced with barriers, the level of effort required to complain is perceived to be higher when accessibility is low rather than high. Without such barriers, however, accessibility did not have any effect.
- Refund, hassle and accessibility interact. Consumer intention to contact the firm increased substantially with the lenient refund policy/low hassle/high accessibility combination. The moderating effect of hassle was contrary to expectations and the authors speculate that consumers only feel confident about a successful outcome when all three factors are in their favor.

The investigation showed that consumers perceive complaining as easier when firms implement policies designed to reduce the time and effort needed to complain. To the author's surprise, however, customer intention to complain was not influenced by the presence of such policies. Further analysis suggested that individual and situational factors outside a company's control may "drive the probability of making complaints". Consumer personality and attitude, and proximity to the store are cited as reasons that could at least partly determine the amount of effort a customer must make in order to register a complaint.

Huppertz raises some doubts about the significance of hassle. It is pointed out that most customers experience some amount of hold up when making a complaint and that the extra inconvenience will often only be minimal. On that premise, the author argues that reducing barriers to complaining may involve more than authorizing employees

to make decisions or not asking customers to complete paperwork.

Another key outcome was the fact that a policy allowing refunds for returned goods increased consumer expectancy of a successful outcome to their complaint. The author concludes that both benefits and costs are predictors of consumer behavior but believe that improving benefits via lenient refund policies is more effective than removing barriers to make complaining easier.

#### Limitations and future research

Using only one setting was accepted as a limitation, especially since aiming to acquire a refund may well be the sole ambition for retail store customers. In other settings, resolutions may involve other factors in addition to or instead of refunds.

The author notes that the link between perceived effort and voicing complaints was not determined by the factors manipulated in the present study. Earlier research has indicated that consumer complaining is also influenced by factors such as past experience, attitudes to complaining and social norms. Further investigation is therefore required in order to explore the complex relations between these factors, company-instigated actions and consumer perceptions of effort needed when deciding whether or not to register disapproval.

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