Customer Participation Strategies and Associated Goals: a Qualitative Investigation

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The interaction between providers and customers is a complicated topic as the ability to identify and meet customer goals is the key to any successful service encounter. Expanding on previous consumer behavior literature, a qualitative methodology combining personal interviews and 70 critical incident surveys identified customer strategies used to achieve desired service exchange outcomes. As the service relationship is bi-directional, the customer's behaviors toward the service providers must be considered. Recognizing these strategies and motivations employed by customers and how they are connected to consumer goals facilitates the service provider's attempts to customize services.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The interaction between service providers and customers in a service setting is a complicated topic in consumer studies. Strategies used by customers to influence satisfaction in encounters have been identified; however the corresponding goals that customers are trying to achieve have been predominantly overlooked. Expanding on previous consumer behavior literature, this research begins to create a typology of customer goals in relation to customer participation strategies through the use of two qualitative studies.

The first study composed of in-depth interviews, was effective at identifying specific action plans and goals used by customers in service situations. Study two, a critical incident survey, was then used to strengthen, support, or disprove the results from study one. Therefore the two sets of findings are discussed together. The six strategies uncovered by this study are relationship building/social dynamics, service definition, reputation building (fame), managing, negative feedback (complaining), and interaction avoidance. Relationship building is the creation of a common ground between employee and customer. An active strategy for a consumer to use, this includes smiling or flirting, showing real or feigned interest in the other person, the sharing of life stories or investigation into shared backgrounds or interests that will help bond you to the other person. Although information seeking to previous authors meant preparation before the service situation, the second strategy type found in these interviews focused more on defining the service provider standards by using detailed questioning throughout the service encounter. Reputation building (or creating personal fame) is a new type of strategy not previously mentioned by other researchers. Consumers reported attempting to increase their Overall personal reputation at the service setting by being overly friendly, overly appreciative, or by exemplifying their ability to purchase goods. A fourth identified strategy is that of a customer behaving like management. Management behavior is seen as acting as a superior or boss to the provider through the dictation of orders or directions and is typically used in conjunction with high-profile service situations such as job meetings or other times when impression management is key. Negative feedback or complaining behaviors typically occur after service failures as a way for customers to get benefits once the scenario is completed. Although previous literature describes participation strategies in a way that makes the reader believe there has to always be participation of some kind, during the interviews conducted here it became clear that there are some times when consumers simply don’t want to use a strategy—thus making the behavior of avoiding interactions a strategy in and of itself.

The second set of findings explored information regarding the goals expected or targeted through customer participation strategies. Although these could be called a number of different things—rewards, outcomes, etc.—the term goal was chosen based on its basic definition-something that a customer wants to achieve (Encarta World Dictionary). The results from the first study led us to identify seven preliminary goal areas: receipt of benefits (increased value), social comfort (rapport), anxiety reduction, future treatment, satisfaction, recompense, and server happiness. Satisfaction, although not a specified goal area in and of itself, must be included due to previous literature and the basic understanding that everyone is attempting to find satisfaction in service encounters. Receipt of benefits is a simple concept which could include anything from the receipt of free or discounted items to additional perks. Social comfort as a goal, such as ease with the provider, rapport building and friendship, were the most frequently mentioned. Anxiety reduction addresses easing the amount of anxiety often felt in different types of service situations. Many people discussed the idea of reputation, of behaving in certain ways in the hopes of receiving positive treatment at future encounters with the same service provider. Although in this study satisfaction was not the primary goal that people identified, it was still worthy of a mention and a category of its own. Much of the previous research in customer participation has focused on satisfaction as the primary goal and found it to be a key component driving what people do in service settings. However, satisfaction was not mentioned as a primary concept in our study. Recompense for service failures is also a key goal named during both studies. After a service failure occurs many consumers appear to use a strategy as some type of intervention specifically to get something back from the provider. Finally a new and interesting goal was found, that of server happiness. Instead of trying to achieve a personal goal of better service or higher satisfaction, a large proportion of CIT responses referred to “cheering the waitress up” or ensuring the providers happiness with the process.

Additional findings included the fact that over half of the CIT surveys showed a personal belief that there was some type of influence being used by consumers over the service situation. Over one-third of respondents reported influencing service situations with their behavior in excess of 80% of the time. 20% believed that they had the power to influence goal attainment 90-100% of the time, while fewer than 15% of the critical incident participants felt they had little or no control at all. It is possible, therefore, that perceived ability to control the service situation is a moderator of the relationship between goal setting and strategy used—this should be tested quantitatively in future research as well.

The findings suggest that although consumers cannot always openly identify for the researcher what they are actually doing, they do believe that their interactions and behaviors have some impact on the service experience. The results here work to extend prior research through the discussion of new customer participation strategies and more importantly, the identification of previously undefined goals and rewards being targeted. The use of customer participation strategies for goal fulfillment is new, and the exploration of the phenomenon opens up the scope of future participation studies.

REFERENCES
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