Outraged Consumers: What Lights Their Fire?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - It seems like outraged consumers are everywhere. They become furious when their flights are cancelled, their telephone bills contain unexpected charges, or the line they must wait in for service is excessively long (Brady, 2000; Appelman, 2001). Considerable research has examined consumer responses to low to moderate levels of dissatisfaction. Researchers have also reported the existence of outraged and highly frustrated consumers who want to get back at firms (Blodgett et al., 1997; Oliver, 1989; Richins, 1983). However, little research has examined in depth the segment of consumers so highly frustrated that they seek to exact revenge on firms or brands. Initial research in this area has documented extreme, and possibly harmful, consumer feelings and behaviors resulting from a consumer desire for vengeance (see, e.g., Nasr and Morrin, in press). In the present paper, we try to better understand the affective experiences of outraged consumers. We particularly focus on what pushes these consumers over the edge, i.e., the main drivers of their outrage.

[to cite]:

[url]:
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It seems like outraged consumers are everywhere. They become furious when their flights are cancelled, their telephone bills contain unexpected charges, or the line they must wait in for service is excessively long (Brady, 2000; Appelman, 2001). Considerable research has examined consumer responses to low to moderate levels of dissatisfaction. Researchers have also reported the existence of outraged and highly frustrated consumers who want to get back at firms (Blodgett et al., 1997; Oliver, 1989; Richins, 1983). However, little research has examined in depth the segment of consumers so highly frustrated that they seek to exact revenge on firms or brands. Initial research in this area has documented extreme, and possibly harmful, consumer feelings and behaviors resulting from a consumer desire for vengeance (see, e.g., Nasr and Morrin, in press). In the present paper, we try to better understand the affective experiences of outraged consumers. We particularly focus on what pushes these consumers over the edge, i.e., the main drivers of their outrage.

Two studies designed to better understand the psychological mechanisms underlying the vengeful behavior of outraged consumers are reported in this paper. Study 1 is exploratory in nature and consists of a content analysis of messages posted on the web by highly frustrated consumers who express a need to “get back” at firms. After detailed analysis of the themes emerging from the web content analysis, we designed a laboratory experiment to investigate, in a more controlled setting, one of the major factors that appeared to be involved in consumers’ desire for vengeance against firms, namely, perceptions of justice.

A non-structured content analysis of 29 web messages located through the Google search engine, revealed four major themes, namely (1) trust violation, (2) rude treatment, (3) feelings of disappointment and helplessness, and (4) the urge to disseminate negative experiences. Consumers became outraged when they felt that firms violated their trust by breaking promises that firms had made initially (e.g., in its advertisements), or in the redress stage, i.e., in the process of handling their complaints. Rude employees were frequently reported in the messages. Such rude treatment by customer service personnel was received with surprise on the part of the consumers who expected to be treated with courtesy. Consumers, particularly those in the redress stage, expect not only courtesy, but feel that an apology is due. Faced with a firm that did not meet their expectations, customers felt disappointed and in a state of disbelief. Their bad experiences were perceived as painful to them. A general feeling of helplessness, i.e., inability to make any useful steps further, was reported. In terms of behavioral response, consumers felt an urge to disseminate their negative experience and considered it something they had to do. Others went further in an attempt to warn consumers about bad firm practices.

The four themes emerging from the content analysis are in line with previous research in the fields of vengeance and consumer dissatisfaction. Researchers have identified trust violation as a main antecedent to vengeance (see, e.g., Bies & Tripp, 1996). This theme is also in line with literature on satisfaction/dissatisfaction where, according to the expectations paradigm, breaking a promise is one form of negative disconfirmation, a main reason for dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1989). Although product/service failures were not necessarily due to employees’ incompetence or mistakes, mistreatment by employees seemed to inflame the problem. The importance of personal interactions has been noted in previous research addressing the redress stage (Blodgett et al., 1993). In studying complaint behavior, Richins (1983) pointed to the absence of a firm’s apology as an incentive to spread negative word-of-mouth.

Feelings of helplessness are an interesting finding as they appear to be qualitatively different than negative emotions experienced by dissatisfied consumers and previously reported by researchers (see, e.g., Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). Researchers in the area of vengeance have reported that feelings of helplessness and the absence of an alternate system to restore order was a main antecedent of vengeful actions (Gould, 2000). This feeling of helplessness has been used to explain the widespread behavior of vengeful activities in societies lacking active judicial systems (Waldmann, 2001). A similar line of reasoning could explain why so many instances of consumer revenge seem to be directed towards large, market-dominant, and highly powerful firms, such as Nike or Microsoft. It is unclear whether participants disseminated information for the good of other consumers, i.e., to help them, or for the bad of the perpetrator firm, i.e., to hurt the firm, or both. Previous studies on negative word-of-mouth behavior have pointed to consumers’ eagerness to share their negative experiences, at times even with complete strangers (Richins, 1983; TAR, 1986).

Study 2 focuses on the redress stage and was designed to address the following questions: (1) is it possible to avoid consumers’ retaliatory behavior by allowing for a better experience at the redress stage, and (2) what makes a redress stage successful in offsetting the vengeful effects of the initial problem? To address these questions, we draw on perceived justice theory. Two aspects of perceived justice, interactive and distributive, were examined as possible psychological triggers to vengeance. Distributive justice is concerned with the perceived fairness of the tangible outcome, e.g., credit for excess billing charges. Interactional justice is the perceived fairness of the manner in which individuals were treated throughout the conflict resolution process, e.g., courtesy of employees handling the complaint.

Results of a 2 X 2 between-subjects laboratory experiment showed that the tangible outcome of a complaint, i.e., perception of distributive justice, is a significant determinant of the feeling of desire for vengeance. However, it takes a perception of bad personal treatment, i.e., low interactive injustice, for consumers to behave sub-optimally or with revenge. In effect, the strong feelings of vengeance led to reactive switching behavior in cases of negative tangible outcomes. However, those feelings were not converted into a proactive response unless the consumer was also treated rudely. In fact, acting vengefully, i.e., proactively, came as a result of bad personal treatment regardless of the tangible outcome of the dispute.

References


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