CONSUMER CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN EVERYDAY SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

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ABSTRACT

The unique characteristics of services create conditions where disagreements between service providers and customers are likely to occur. The results of a preliminary study designed to examine the strategies used by consumers deal with conflict in everyday service encounters are reported. The findings suggest that consumers are likely to use a variety of conflict management strategies and that their strategies are influenced by the mix of economic and social motives.

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Participants were exposed to all levels of treatment, and the stimuli were counterbalanced to prevent learning effects. Participants were presented with a booklet of print advertisements for a fictitious brand of digital cameras. After viewing each ad, participants responded to a questionnaire that contained all of the dependent measures. The print stimuli were a series of eight advertisements for a digital camera. All advertisements were identical with the exception of the socially categorized model. The models in the advertisements were chosen from stock photos of non-celebrity models. The order of advertisements was counterbalanced according to the various treatment conditions.

As hypothesized members of the respective socially categorized ethnic group classified themselves more favorably than other groups as a whole. This is consistent with the phenomenon of ingroup favoritism. In addition, the black sheep hypothesis held across all treatments for the respondents in the Caucasian and Asian categories. For Hispanic respondents the black sheep effect was supported except for the evaluation of the Caucasian target. Respondents in the African American category did not exhibit the black sheep effect. They evaluated the deviate ingroup member more favorably than outgroup deviates, which is not in support of the black sheep hypothesis. Additionally, ingroup favoritism was only shown among Asian respondents, thus H1 is supported for that group only. The other three groups evaluated themselves less favorably than members of the outgroup.

Research question 1: What conflict management styles do consumers use in everyday service interactions?

A number of authors have suggested the role of multiple motives in conflict resolution (e.g., Carnevale and Pruitt 1992). Recently, Ohbuchi and his co-authors proposed multiple goal theory (Fukushima and Ohbuchi 1996; Ohbuchi and Tedeschi 1997), which considers social motives, as well as resource (economic) motives, in interpersonal conflicts. Economic exchanges in services involve resource issues (money, time), but also are likely to involve social motives. Ohbuchi and Tedeschi’s (1997) research suggests that in everyday interpersonal conflicts (non-business), social motives are often activated in addition to resource (economic) motives.

Research question 2: In everyday minor conflicts with services providers, are social motives important and are they as important as economic motives?

Fukushima and Ohbuchi (1996) also suggest a relationship between motives and conflict management strategies.

Research question 3: In the resolution of minor conflicts with service providers, are consumers’ resolution tactics related to their motives?

If both social and economic motives are activated in service conflict situations, the choice of resolution strategy is likely to be influenced by the mix (combination) of motives expressed by each customer. Therefore, it would be expected that the level of activation of various motives (profiles) would vary between the different categories of conflict strategies employed.

Research question 4: Does the mix of motives (mean levels of activation) vary across alternative conflict resolution strategies employed?

A study was conducted to examine these research questions. The participants were 70 undergraduate students enrolled in business related courses at a large Midwestern university. Students were given a scenario in which they had been confronted by a video rental store about
a lost rented DVD. They were then asked to respond to a motives questionnaire, followed by an open-ended question about how they would deal with the conflict situation. The student responses to the open-ended question were coded by two independent coders for the presence or absence of four conflict strategies: integrating, obliging, compromising, and dominating. The level of agreement between the coders for each strategy was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa statistic (all>.70). Motives were measured with six-point likert-style scales based on Fukushima and Ohbuchi (1996).

The results suggest that respondents used a number of different conflict management strategies in their attempt to resolve the conflict over the lost DVD. Compromise was the most frequently used strategy (N=26), followed closely by integration (N=24), and obliging (N=23). Relatively few respondents used a dominating strategy (N=6). The results also indicate that social motives were at least as (two were actually more) important than economic motives. Looking at the means across the motive categories, justice was the most important motive (9.97), followed by relational (8.20), economic (7.80), and identity (7.75), respectively. The relationship between motives and strategies employed was assessed using binary logistic regression. Significant predictors were found for each of the strategies except the integrative strategy. The results suggest that the higher the economic motive the lower the probability of an obliging strategy being used. Similarly, the higher the justice motive, the lower the probability of a dominating strategy and the higher the relationship motive, the lower the probability of a compromise strategy.

Based on the premise of mixed motives, we examined profiles of the means for the four motives by strategy. For the obliging strategy, the justice motive was the strongest, followed by relationship and identity, with economic being the weakest motive. For the aggressive strategy, the economic motive was highest and the relational motive was lowest. For the compromise strategy, the justice motive was highest, followed by economic and identity, with relational being the lowest. For integrative, justice was very high, followed by relational, identity, and economic.

Obviously, the study is preliminary in nature, however, it does provide some insights. The study suggests that even in a fairly insignificant service conflict situation, consumer behavior can be fairly complex. Therefore, service employees cannot rely on predetermined, “one-best-way,” strategies for handling consumer conflicts. Frontline employees must be able to identify alternative strategies and be capable of adapting their style of responding to conflict with customers. Alternative strategies were activated based on mixed motives. Maintaining a working relationship with the retailer and justice were rated to be more important motives to customers than the most favorable economic outcome. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have emphasized the importance of justice in complaint resolution (Goodwin and Ross 1989; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran 1998). These results also consistent with Fukushima and Ohbuchi’s (1996) research, which indicated that an integrative strategy was related to relational motives, an obliging strategy was positively related to relationship motives and negatively related to economic motives, and an aggressive style was related to high economic and identity motives.

References

Relationships Among Individual, Institutional, and System Level Public Trust: A Case for Consumer Evaluations of Food Safety
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Extended Abstract
Many of the most challenging public policy issues of our century hang on the problem of public trust. Despite the central importance of public trust to consumer behavior and public policy research, relatively little is known about the origins and relationships between various types/levels of public trust. For example, it is not clear why consumers trust their own grocery stores and yet distrust grocery stores in general in providing safe food. Further, it is not clear why as consumers distrust food retailers, regulatory agencies, law-makers, food.