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Complaint behavior and satisfaction with complaint outcome: A look at gender differences

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Background and Review of Literature

Understanding the types and characteristics of people who file complaints is an important part of a complaint handling agency's duties to ensure total quality management (Lam and Dale, 1999). It is especially important for the agency to understand consumer satisfaction, as well as how (and if) the case was handled and resolved (from the consumer's point of view). Moreover, it is crucial to understand consumers who may be more vulnerable in the marketplace due to a lack of understanding of laws, or naïve trust in sellers. (Andreasen & Manning, 1990; Bakus et al., 1991). Vulnerable consumers often have more to lose if something goes wrong with a transaction. The "evolving customer base brought about by geographic, demographic, and life-style variance must be monitored". (Lepak (1998), pg. 121).

Minority status is just one type of vulnerability. Consumers who have lower incomes, are alone, or are single parents also may be vulnerable in the marketplace. Particularly, women may be more vulnerable. Past research found that men are more likely to complain than are women (Strahle & Day, 1984; Tipper, 1997). Having young children decreases the likelihood of complaining. There is an opportunity cost, with mothers taking away time from child care that may influence their motivation and outcome satisfaction. No research could be found on marital status and employment status

It is important to understand the differences and similarities in the complaining behavior of men and women. Specifically, how they learn about the complaint handling agencies, if they receive satisfaction with the outcome of their complaint, and if they would re-use or recommend the agency. Increased knowledge about these issues will provide a more informed and satisfied consumer group.

Research Methodology

Data were collected from a third party complaint handling agency in Southern California. Because Southern California is one of the most diverse areas in the nation, it is particularly appropriate to look at its consumers, as they represent a wide variety of ethnicities. This agency is the primary complaint handling agency for consumer-vendor complaints. They receive approximately 300,000 calls per year on their consumer hot-line. Approximately 15% are Spanish speaking consumers. Additionally, they receive over 3,000 consumer-vendor complaints through the mail. Investigators who speak a variety of languages (Spanish, Tagalog, Chinese) are available to process the complaint file. Investigators work with the files until they are closed. Files are closed when the case is referred to another agency, does not fall under their jurisdiction, or is handled by the agency.

A survey was mailed to a random sample of all consumers who filed a complaint in 1998 (N = 3,045). Spanish speaking complainants were over sampled to best understand the characteristics of these consumers (these

complainants received the survey in Spanish). The survey asked questions about the following: knowledge about the agency, complaint specifics, satisfaction with service, staff, and outcome, zip code, marital status, number of children, ethnicity, primary language, country of origin, time in the United States, education, home ownership, employment status, age, and income. The population receiving this survey is unique because they have taken action and filed a complaint with the appropriate third party agency.

Results

Descriptive analyses of the 426 returned surveys revealed: 35% were Latino, 33% were Caucasian, 12% were Asian, 12% were African American, and 3% were Native American. Fifty-three percent were married, the average number of kids was 1.6, 50% were male, 25% had a Bachelor's degree, 56% owned their own home, 55% were employed full time, average income was between \$30-40,000, average age was 47. Resulting data provides a preliminary picture of the consumers being served by the agency.

Inferential relationships were investigated between gender, demographic descriptors, and outcome satisfaction variables. T-test results indicate several things: 1) women are more likely than men to try to resolve the complaint with the vendor before turning to a third party complaint handling agency; 2) men are more likely than women to feel they were kept informed of the third party complaint handling agency's investigation; 3) men are more likely than women to say they would use the agency's services again; 4) men report higher incomes

than women; 5) male complainants are more likely to be married than are women complainants; 6) male complainants are more likely to be employed full time than are women complainants. These results will be presented in more detail at the conference, including statistical tables, etc.

Discussion and Conclusions

Results indicate that men and women exhibited different complaining styles in this study. Women work with the vendor more often than do men. However, after turning to a third party agency for help, men feel they more informed, and more likely to use the agency again than women. In terms of demographics, male complainants report higher incomes, higher rates of married and more full time employment than do women.

These findings are somewhat in line with past research on vulnerability. Women are may be more vulnerable due to their lower incomes, higher likelihood of being alone and less full-time employment. Results suggest that perhaps third party agencies need to advertise their services to women to help keep them from falling prey in the market place. Improving service to consumers is important regardless of business type. Complaint handling agencies supported by government funds are in a unique position in that they often must maintain their "market position" to secure and justify their need to their superiors.

These and other recommendations will be elaborated upon in the poster session at the conference. Results will provide valuable information to

researchers, practitioners working with a variety of communities, as well as, complaint-handling agencies.

Selected References

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