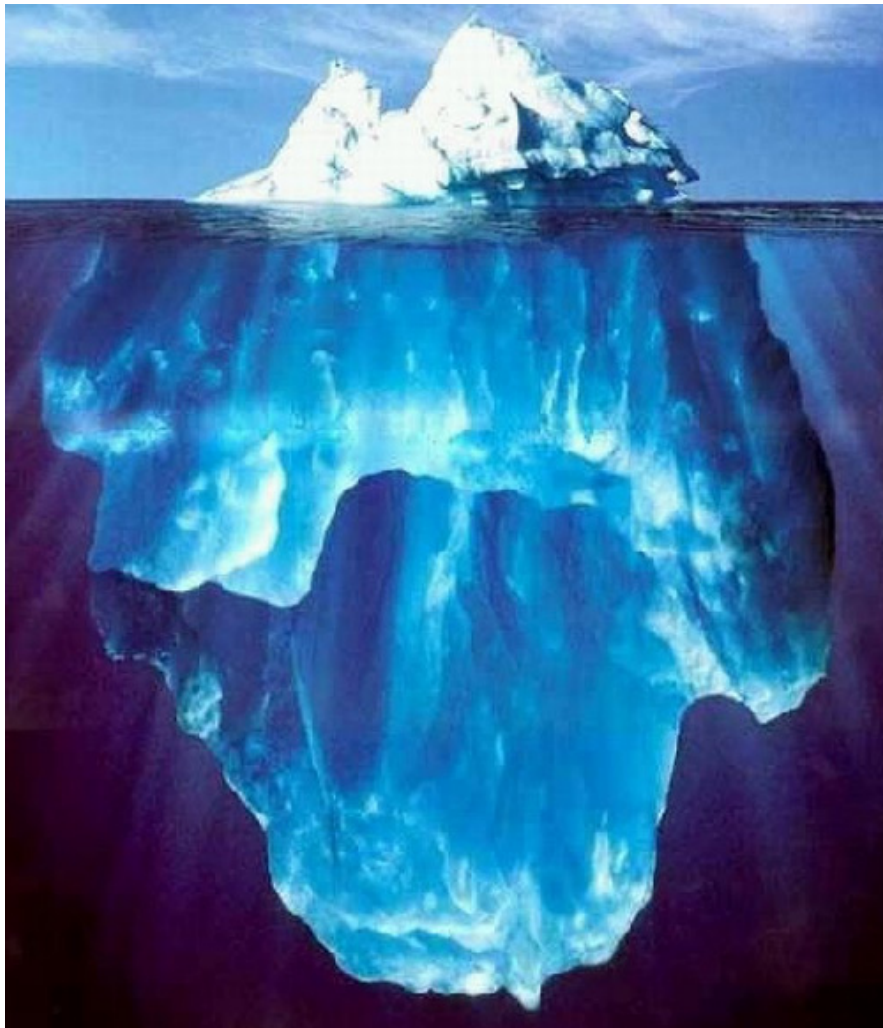




Consumer complaint behavior (CCB): a literature review

Complaining is good for you as long as you're not complaining
to the person you're complaining about. (Lynn Johnston)



INDEX

1. Introduction	p. 3
2. To complain or not to complain: the customer dilemma	p. 4
3. Choosing among several options : the expression of dissatisfaction.....	p. 6
4. Multiple factors affecting the consumer complaint behavior.....	p. 11
5. Offering a second opportunity: the post-complaining consumer behavior.....	p. 16
6. Managerial issues	p. 18
7. CCB and libraries.....	p. 21
8. Conclusions.....	p. 22
9. Bibliography.....	p. 23

1. Introduction^{*}

The consumer complaint behavior, CCB in short[†], is an area of research which deals with the identification and analysis of all the aspects involved in the consumer reaction to a product or a service failure and the consequent perceived dissatisfaction.

A growing interest for CCB starts appearing toward the middle of the '60s as a particular aspect of a general attention for consumer behaviors and attitudes. Consumer satisfaction, dissatisfaction and consumer complaint behavior, in particular, are three distinct, but highly correlated subjects investigated by marketing and consumer studies.

Real marketing problems can be considered at the origin of these studies. The growing competition in the market, the developing consumerism, the importance given to quality, performance and satisfaction, the emphasis given to customers, considered at the centre of a product or of a service, bring researchers to inquiry about the complex mechanisms which determine customer satisfactions or dissatisfaction and what are the consequent consumer behaviors.

At the same time, as the research is deeply rooted in real life, the findings of the studies are aimed at identifying and suggesting managerial and practical solutions directly applicable to markets or services.

As far as CCB research is concerned, the main aspects investigated can be summarized according to the some questions. The proposed list is anything but exhaustive:

- ◆ Why do people complain?
- ◆ Why do people not complain?
- ◆ To whom do people complain?
- ◆ Facing an unsatisfactory product or service, what are the possible reactions available for a customer?
- ◆ Are there any differences in CCB according to the product or the service investigated?

^{*} Throughout all the literature review, the words customer, user and consumer have been used alternatively and as quasi-synonyms. It is true that their exact meaning is different and the terms belong to distinct areas. However, complaint behavior concerns customers, users and consumers all together. Other terms were alike possible: patron, client... To avoid gender problem, the used terms are normally in the plural form. If used in the singular form, "he" has been chosen as the related pronoun instead of the annoying and pedantic "he/she" or the mix of plural and singular (e.g. "The user does not like to show their feelings"). Considering that the subject has been studied especially in the United States, the American spelling "behavior" has been preferred to the British spelling "behaviour". The same for its derivations.

- ◆ What does a consumer expect from complaints?
- ◆ How frequently do consumer complaints receive satisfaction?
- ◆ Is it possible to group consumers according to their complaint behavior?
- ◆ How do personal characteristics of consumers affect CCB?
- ◆ After complaining, what are the possible reactions available for a customer (post-complaining behavior)?
- ◆ Which factors have effect on complaining handling?
- ◆ What is the value of complaints for a company?
- ◆ What is the cost of not receiving complaints or of not handling complaints properly?
- ◆ What should be the managerial reaction to complaints?

2. To complain or not to complain: the consumer dilemma

Paradoxically, the direct expression of complaints is not the core of CCB studies. Complaints directly expressed are not the unique, neither the first reaction of customers toward a problem. On the contrary, consumers voice their complaints only seldom and under some determined conditions.

Statistical data and studies may offer some differences in the estimation of complaint rates, but these differences can be explained considering both the specific sectors studied and the research techniques applied. For sure, less than the half of the problems experienced by customers are directly voiced (Best and Andreasen, 1977). Companies are normally aware only of a small percentage of breakdowns. The metaphor of the tip-of-the-iceberg (Best and Andreasen, 1977, p. 701; Wall, Dickey and Talarzyk, 1977, p. 100) can be appropriately used in this context. In spite of few explicit complaints, most of the problems stay hidden. For this reason, a small amount of complaints is anything but a valid indicator of quality or of user satisfaction. On the contrary, a limited number of complaints or, in certain cases, the absolute lack of complaints should be considered as an “early warning signal” (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990, p. 109). For the same reason, complaining reduction should not be considered as a valuable purpose.

According to Andreasen (1988, p. 675), on the basis of several studies, it is possible to "conclude that consumers experience problems in about 20 percent of their purchases, complain to the seller [...] 40 percent of the time and perceive that they have received satisfaction from this

[†] Quite interesting, the acronym CCB is referred to four different expressions: 1) customer complaint behavior; 2) customer complaining behavior; 3) consumer complaint behavior; 4) consumer complaining behavior. In the literature review, the preferred expression is consumer complaint behavior.

complaining behavior 60 of the time". However, the author warns that all the aspects involved in consumer complaint behavior "vary significantly across purchase categories" (p. 702).

One of the first concepts to consider is dissatisfaction and its key role in CCB. Not being the direct object of this study, it is possible to define satisfaction and dissatisfaction as consequences of the perceived gap between the consumer expectations and the real experience. This concept is generally defined as disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1987, p. 218). When the experience overcomes the expectations, the customer is satisfied (positive disconfirmation); on the contrary, when the expectations are not fulfilled by the experience, the customer is dissatisfied (negative disconfirmation). A neutral reaction is normally the consequence of an even match between expectations and experience (confirmation) (Blodgett, Granbois and Walters, 1993, p. 403).

For these reasons, dissatisfaction should be considered as an antecedent of complaining (Landon, 1980) while the intensity of dissatisfaction seems to play a secondary role (Oliver, 1987; Prakash, 1991). However, dissatisfaction is not enough for complaining and consumer complaint behavior could not simply be incorporated "into a theoretical model of consumer satisfaction" (Bearden and Teel, 1983, p. 21). Day (1984, p. 496) underlines that "complaining behavior is logically subsequent to dissatisfaction and is a distinct set of activities which are influenced by a variety of personal and situational factors which appear to be unrelated to the intensity of dissatisfaction". Consumer complaining behavior is a multidimensional and extremely complex phenomenon which denies the excessive simplification that has characterized some studies (Singh and Howell, 1985, p. 44).

When customers decide to complain, they have previously passed through two distinct, even if interrelated, steps already identified by Hirschman (1970):

- ◆ they value positively the balance between costs and benefits. Both costs and benefits are not only economic, but also psychological (Andreasen, 1988). The perceived benefit can be not great enough to lead a consumer to complain, even if considerable dissatisfaction exists. On the contrary, a consumer can complain even with a low level of dissatisfaction if the perceived benefit is remarkable (Landon, 1977, p. 32)
- ◆ they value worthwhile the complaining action because they esteem positively the likelihood of obtaining a favourable solution

As far as the first point is concerned, it is extremely important to understand that complaining is not a cost-free activity. The cost of complaining is absolutely subjective, but it is possible to recognize a material component, the time invested in introducing complaints, and a psychological component which includes embarrassment, fear, incertitude, confrontation...

As far as the second point is concerned, a dissatisfied customer evaluates the probability of a favourable outcome of complaining estimating, also on the basis of "reputation" (Day and Landon, 1977, p. 433-434), the responsiveness of the company.

By complaining, customers can search for different possible outcomes which can be combined together. On average, customers hope for a tangible solution of a specific problem, through refund, exchange, repair; a psychological compensation obtaining apologies; a social benefit, "preventing the cause for their dissatisfaction from occurring to other consumers" (Landon, 1977, p. 32). In other circumstances, a complaint has only one objective: venting anger and frustration for reducing stress. In this case, no reaction from the seller or the service is really expected and the complaining behavior has a cathartic effect (Nyer, 2000).

3. Choosing among several options: the expression of dissatisfaction

At its early stage and even afterwards (Bodey and Grace, 2006; Voorhees, Brady and Horowitz, 2006), the research on CCB has focused on the dichotomy complainers/noncomplainers. Even if this is an important and basic distinction, it is only a first step. Both complainers and noncomplainers can choose among different concrete actions which can be combined together determining a multiform and complex behavior.

The very seminal work about the alternatives available to dissatisfied people is *Exit, voice and loyalty: responses to decline in firms, organizations and states* written in 1970 by Albert O. Hirschman. As it appears in the title, Hirschman takes in consideration not only the economic world, but extend his analysis to other areas. In fact, some principles of CCB can be applied to other subjects where dissatisfaction is experienced, private life included.

The model proposed by Hirschman, based on three possible options, has been further developed by other authors who, explicitly or not, have made reference to his seminal work. Day and Landon (1977) offer this classification of consumer compliant behavior based on a first distinction between "no action" and "action" and a second distinction between "private action" and "public action"[‡]:

Take no action at all, forget the experience (Loyalty)	No-action
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[‡] The expression normally used in literature to identify the specific behavior is placed between parentheses.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Decide to stop buying product or brand or boycott seller (Exit) ◆ Warn friends about the product and/or seller (Negative word-of-mouth) 	Action	Private action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Seek redress directly from business firms (Voice) ◆ Take legal action to obtain redress ◆ Complain to business , private, or governmental agencies (Third party complaint) 		Public action

A short description of some of these behaviors can help to better understand CCB.

Loyalty: it is the situation in which the customer decides not to complains, but to stay loyal to a service or to a product accepting silently and passively its decline. It is important to underline that the word loyal has, in this case, no moral or positive value. The customer is loyal, despite the problem experienced and the consequent dissatisfaction, especially because there is no available alternative. Loyalty is one of those cognitive, non-behavioral reactions which, in same cases, can affect consumers' perception of the problem up to deny that dissatisfaction exists (Olshavsky, 1977, p. 161).

Exit: it is the situation in which customers decide not to repurchase or not to use a service again. In the future, they will choose another service or another product. In order to choose exit, one or more alternatives should be available and known by the dissatisfied customer. Day and Landon (1977) link "exit" to "boycott" as a more radical and active reaction to dissatisfaction

Negative word-of-mouth (WOM): the dissatisfied customers decide to inform their friends about their negative experience with a product or a service. Those who choose WOM can pursuit different objectives: alerting their affiliation of a possible danger, punishing the dissatisfying product or service, simply expressing their anger and frustration. Independently from the objective pursued, the effect is the same: the spread of discredit and the impossibility for the subjects directly involved to find a remedy or simply to be aware of the process.

Third party complaint: the dissatisfied users complain not directly to those immediately involved in the dissatisfying experience but to another subject, a third party, which can be, for example, a consumer association or a body hierarchically superior. Research says that this kind of action is one of the less chosen (Best and Andreasen, 1977) and normally it is not the first-choice option (Grønhaug, 1977).

Voice: in this situation, customers decide to express their dissatisfaction to the responsible party. According to Oh (2003; 2004) it is possible to make an important distinction between direct complaint and indirect complaint. The first is expressed at the moment of the service or product failure, the second afterwards.

Basing his research on empirical data, Singh (1988) extends the two-dimensional model proposed by Day and Landon, to a three-dimensional schema which considers primarily the different involvement of the object toward which CCB responses are directed:

Category	Object	Possible actions
Voice responses	External to the consumer's social circle and directly involved in the dissatisfying exchange	Seek redress; no-action
Private responses	Not external to the consumer's social net and not directly involved in the dissatisfying experience	Word-of-mouth
Third party responses	External to the consumer but not directly involved in the dissatisfying transaction	e.g. Legal action

Taking into account the different alternatives available, it is important to stress, again, that some behaviors are actually incompatible, but other responses "can be utilized by consumers in various combinations" (Day and Bodur, 1978, p. 263). For example customers can be loyal or exit, but if they choose to exit, they can not be loyal and vice versa. Nevertheless, other options can be chosen altogether without any contradiction. A dissatisfied customer can, in fact, exit, engage in negative word-of-mouth, complain to a third party and voice his complaint showing a coherent and not

contradictory behavior. Coming back to the basic distinction between noncomplainers and complainers, it is possible to define the former as those who do not take action at all or only take private actions and the latter as those who take private and/or public actions (Phau and Sari, 2004, p. 413). Public action is then the discriminating between the two categories.

Considering this multidimensional aspect of CCB, authors have tried to rank the alternatives available according to the cost of each behavior. The idea is that if customers have decided to voice their dissatisfaction, which is the option with the highest cost, it is very likely, even if not certain, that they have already chosen, or will choose afterwards, other less costly options, like negative word-of-mouth.

In order to complete the "big picture" of CCB, a brief mention should be made also to the distinction between complaint intentions and actual complaint behaviors. According to Oh (2004; 2006), only complaint intentions can be effectively scaled. On the contrary, complaint behaviors can be measured by a "yes or no" dichotomy. However, the two concepts are strictly correlated: the possibility of transforming complaint intentions into complaint behaviors is deeply affected by the availability and practicability of complaining channels. This consideration stresses the importance of offering customers appropriate entry points for their complaints (McCole, 2004, p. 346) and, when possible, providing both interactive and remote channels leaving the choice to the users. Different channels can fit different goals and different complaining styles (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004).

The complaint behaviors listed above form the so called "taxonomy" of CCB, a classification of actions. They are, however, behaviors which can be chosen by different individuals. Singh (1990a) has tried to identify, according to the chosen behaviors, some categories of consumers. Through a research based mainly on dissatisfaction experienced in services and avoiding abstract criteria, it is possible to define a "typology" of consumers that is a classification of people. It is important to note how far CCB research has moved from the simple dichotomy between complainers and noncomplainers.

Category	Description	Percentage
Passives	Dissatisfied consumers whose intentions to complain are below average. This group is least likely to take any action	14 %

Voicers	Dissatisfied consumers who prefer to voice their complaints instead of opting for exit, negative word-of-mouth or complaining to third parties	37 %
Irates	Angry consumers who engage in negative word-of-mouth, switch patronage and voice their complaints. It is less likely that they choose third-party actions	21 %
Activists	Dissatisfied consumers who are characterized by above complaint activity on all three dimensions (voice, private, third party). They are not only interested in individual redress but also in social benefit	28 %

Finally, it is interesting to notice that if only some of the dissatisfied users decide to complain, those who complain are not necessarily dissatisfied users (Landon, 1977, p. 31) or, in some cases, are not users at all. In particular Jacoby and Jaccard (1981), in a research commissioned by the Firestone Tire & Rubber Co., suggest that complaints should be attentively verified because "the true relationship between complaints and product defectiveness is obscured by ... [a] large number of additional variables" (p. 18). The real reason of consumer complaints can stay hidden and complaints can stem also from unreasonable expectations, from the inability to understand if a problem really exists and from the incapability to use properly a product or a service. Even when a problem subsists, the consumer can be responsible of it or the cause can be a factor beyond both the consumer's and the manufacturer's control. Beside complaints introduced by dissatisfied users, the authors list:

- ◆ complaints by satisfied or indifferent users
- ◆ complaints by non-users who are purchasers
- ◆ complaints by non-users who are nonpurchaser

In short, it seems that if not all dissatisfied consumers complain, not all complainers are actually dissatisfied (Oliver, 1987, p. 221). Besides, dissatisfaction is not always felt, nor is always justified (Day and Landon, 1977, p. 426-427).

These considerations are particularly important because they can partially explain some resistances in stimulating and accepting favourably consumer complaints: it is always possible that a consumer is trying to rip off a company simulating a product or service failure. However, the cases of deception can not justify a steady defensive attitude toward complaints. As far as research is concerned, little attention has been given to the behaviors and the motivations of those consumers who knowingly voice "fake complaints" which represent the "dishonest" and "unjustified" side of CCB (Reynolds and Harris, 2005, p. 321).

4. Multiple factors affecting consumer complaint behavior

Researchers have tried to identify those variables which directly or indirectly can have an influence on consumer complaint behavior. Analysing these factors, CCB shows all its complexity and its multifaceted aspects. This complexity is, from the one hand, one of the most interesting and intriguing aspect of CCB, from the other hand, it is at the origin of the weakness of many studies about complaint behavior. Stressing different elements, the findings of CCB studies are often characterized by some contradictions and a lack of consistency. Besides, due to its complexity, CCB lacks of a comprehensive model which covers all the involved factors. However, the general framework of CCB can be reconstructed considering the most significant contributions. After many years of research, CCB studies have renounced to modify this outline, preferring, instead, to verify it or some of its aspects in specific sectors, through case-studies or fine tuning the models according to specific parameters.

In order to understand properly CCB, it is necessary to identify some general mechanisms which characterize consumer behavior and make it, to a certain extension, predictable. However, it is extremely important to understand that these mechanisms depend largely on some factors, situational and not situational, which can not be underestimated. Generalization and differentiation should be both considered in CCB.

The first factor which should be deemed is probably the specific sector involved in complaint behavior. Researchers have detected relevant differences in CCB if the customer uses a service or,

instead, buys a product. In particular, consumers seem to experience a greater dissatisfaction with services than products (Best and Andreasen, 1977) and the most frequently mentioned reason for dissatisfaction seems to be the careless and unprofessional manner which characterises the service (Day and Bodur, 1978, p. 265). Considering products, another important distinction should be traced between durable and not durable products (Day and Ash, 1979). In general, it appears particularly significant how essential the product is for everyday life (Day and Landon, 1977, p. 434).

If the products or the services involved in CCB are important, the market structures play a fundamental role as well. In his seminal work afterwards developed by Andreasen (1985) and Singh (1990b, 1991), Hirschman (1970) had already stressed the different consumer behavior according to the market situation. The consumer reaction toward a product or a service decline can vary enormously if alternatives are really and easily available. A dissatisfied user can smoothly opt for exit in a competitive market where competitors are known and accessible. The presence of a free competitive market increases the available choices for consumers and obliges companies to be sensitive to quality decline and to be respondent to customer complaints.

On the contrary, in a monopolistic situation or, more realistically and frequently, in "loose monopoly", where a small amount of competition exists, the most likely reaction to product or service failure is staying silently loyal or engaging in negative word-of-mouth, option not considered by Hirschman. In these cases, voice can have limited effect and exit is nearly impossible because, in reality or in the consumer mind, this alternative "is closed" (Tronvoll, 2007). In "loose monopoly" only few "sophisticated" customers are aware of quality decline and know possible alternatives. However, they prefer to exit than to voice their complaints and companies either are not aware of this loss, due to new entrants, or welcome it. According to Hirschman, the situation for consumers in "loose monopoly" is, for these reasons, even worse than in true monopoly. In the first case, in fact, those aware of poor performance prefer to switch, in the second one, they express their complaints forming a sort of "quality elite". Naturally this dynamic affects also those company genuinely interested in product or service quality (Andreasen, 1985, p. 137).

Another variable to be considered is the dynamic interrelation between the customer and the product or service concerned. The very same product or service have for all the customers the same objective characteristics. However, the relation between a product or service and a customer is, in a way, unique because each customer has a different perception and attributes to the product/service a different value. Objective and subjective elements have both a determining role in any consumer experience.

Consumers tend to voice, to complain openly, when the dissatisfaction is important (Landon, 1977; Richins, 1985a). In a model introduced by Landon (1977), the importance of dissatisfaction is a complex determinant which involves different variables: product cost, search time, physical harm, ego involvement. Furthermore, complaints are more frequent when the problem is perceived manifest more than judgmental (Landon, 1977, p. 34; Best and Andreasen, 1977, p. 719). That means that problems are reported only under determined circumstances. Again, the number of directly expressed complaints is just a minimal part of the potential complaints.

A third variable to be considered is represented by the characteristic of customers. Some of these characteristics are general; others are related to the identity as a consumer. Researchers have tried to group and profiling customers according to different aspects: age, sex, education, income, living area, nationality and personality. It is important to notice that studies focused on socioeconomic characteristics have not only a scientific meaning, but also a practical implication, trying to identify specific demographic segments of the population "to be the target of concerted education and advisory and protective services" (Kraft, 1977, p. 79). However, the findings of studies on this aspect of CCB have shown a very limited consistency and a reduced significance. Complainers appear as a heterogeneous group (Gaedeke, 1972) and the sociodemographics are judged having scarce or no explanatory power (Grønhaug and Zaltman, 1981, p. 122-123).

If it is possible to identify some prevailing characteristics in complainers, it seems that higher education and higher income are both positively related to complaining (Warland, Hermann and Willitis, 1975; Andreasen, 1988, p. 695-697) not only in the Western world but also in developing countries (Phau and Sari, 2004). In some studies not only the individual characteristics are considered, but those of the entire household (e.g. Granbois, Summers and Frazier, 1977)

Living in urban areas appears to affect positively complaint behavior (Grønhaug, 1977, p. 162) confirming that, in general, resources of different nature play a fundamental role in CCB (Grønhaug and Zaltman, 1981, p. 126). Considering age, Warland, Hermann and Willitis (1975) suggest that younger consumers are the most inclined to complain while the elderly seem to have more difficulties in complaining assertively. For this reason, they appear as a category particularly vulnerable in the marketplace (Koeske and Srivastava, 1977). Problem and complaint incidence seem to be higher for women than for men, but this probably reflects "differences in shopping roles rather than true sex differences in complaining tendency" (Granbois, Summers and Frazier, 1977, p. 23).

As far as nationality is concerned, comparative studies suggest that complaining inclination is positively enhanced by a high economic development, a strict level of market regulation and by an

active role of the consumer association (Day *et al.*, 1981). Other researches underline that both cultural values and institutional barriers may inhibit complaining and influence the choice of complaining actions (Hernandez *et al.*, 1991). In general, CCB, studied prevalently in Western countries, can show different features in other parts of the globe (Liu and McClure, 2001).

Other characteristics of customers are, instead, specifically related to the individual as a consumer. In this field, especially these variables have been taken into account in researches:

- ◆ Frequency of purchase and experience of product/service
- ◆ Previous complaining experience
- ◆ General attitude toward complaining

Customers who purchase a product reiteratively and who, for this reason, have a good knowledge of the product are more able to detect a problem (Wall, Dickey and Talarzyk, 1977). Besides, they are more inclined to complain directly if their previous complaining experiences have been positive, if they generally have a positive attitude toward complaining (Kim *et al.*, 2003), if they think that others will benefit from their complaint (public consciousness) and if they have developed the skills of an effective consumer (Day and Landon, 1977, p. 434). However, even in this field excessive generalization should be avoided: infrequently purchased products, for example, are characterized by a higher voicing than frequently purchased products probably due to their generally greater cost (Best and Andreasen, 1977, p. 717). On the other hand, customers who interact often with a particular seller are less likely to express their complaints due to the development of a loyal attitude (Andreasen, 1988, p. 696). However, according to Landon (1980, p. 335) "frequent purchases could lead to higher voice index because the cost of complaining is probably lower than for infrequent purchases. The consumer knows right where to go - in fact a complaint may be incorporated into the next purchase episode - and the consumer may expect better attention because she or he is a valued customer". Besides, a low voice rate can be also the "natural result of satisfaction".

Richins (1982; 1983) has given particular importance to attitude for explaining CCB, but it is important to remember that the link between attitude and behavior has been intensely questioned (Nantel, 1985, p. 55). For Richins, assertiveness and self-confidence play an important role in the complaint behavior. However, according to a study based on complaint letters, it seems not feasible to determinate a precise personality profile of complainers (Zaichkowsky and Liefeld, 1977).

Nevertheless, some personality traits can intensely influence the complaint behavior (Bodey and Grace, 2006).

Finally, CCB has been studied in relationship to the attribution of responsibility (Folkes, 1984). After a dissatisfaction experience with a product or a service, the complaint behavior is affected by three considerations of customers:

- ◆ **Stability of the problem:** customers evaluate if the problem experienced is stable or accidental. If the problem is considered connatural and permanent, customers evaluate negatively the likelihood to receive redress and prefer not to complain
- ◆ **Locus of responsibility:** consumers complain more frequently if they consider that the responsible for the problem is the seller, the producer or the service, whereas they prefer not to complain, choosing instead other options, if they consider themselves partially responsible of the problem
- ◆ **Control:** dissatisfied consumer complain more frequently if they think that something could have been done in order to prevent the problem to occur

As for many other human phenomena, consumer complaint behavior can be explained in different ways. Andreassen (1988, p. 677) has identified, considering some elements described above, four distinct models. Naturally, other theoretical frames have been proposed (Grønhaug and Zaltman, 1981, p. 121):

- ◆ **Cost-benefit model:** based on the customer's evaluation of dissatisfaction, cost-benefit of complaining and probability of success. In this model, each problem occasion is unique
- ◆ **Personality model:** based on the personal characteristics of customers
- ◆ **Learning model:** based on the idea that complaining is a learnt behavior developed with direct experience
- ◆ **Restraints model:** based on the idea that complaining is especially conditioned by the presence or absence of obstacles

These are only some hints of the numerous perspectives and approaches through which it is possible to observe and to understand CCB and this general overview is anything but complete. However, the purpose of this literature review is not to define the state of art, nor to write the history of CCB. Less pretentiously, the focus is on the extreme complexity of consumer complaint

behavior and on the numerous, even if not countless, variables involved which are at the origin of "the many different and sometimes contrasting theoretical frameworks for explaining the CCB process" (Singh and Howell, 1985, p. 45).

5. Offering a second opportunity: the post-complaining consumer behavior

The studies about CCB have especially focused on the different options available for dissatisfied consumers, stressing the fact that overt complaining is, in general, an alternative not frequently used with disadvantages for all the subjects involved. On the contrary, "an increase in the rates at which consumers voice complaints could benefit individual consumers, businesses and society as a whole" (Best and Andreasen, 1977, p. 730). Less attention has been given to real complaints, the mechanisms involved in them and to the organizational response (Resnik, Gnauck and Aldrich, 1977; Gilly, 1987; Hsieh, Thomas and Rotem, 2005, p. 309). In general, the organizational response to complaints seems to be not completely satisfactory: according to researches analyzed by Gilly (1987, p. 294) response rates to complaints have varied from 79% to 56% and only a portion of those who receive a response are satisfied. Dissatisfied consumers who do not complain and complainers who do not receive a satisfactory redress determine what is defined as "residual dissatisfaction" (Andreasen, 1988, p. 687).

When dissatisfied customers decide to complain, winning the reluctance explained above, they are offering companies a second opportunity. Only when customers, through direct complaining, are looking for redress, apology and psychological benefit it is possible to transform their dissatisfaction into "a second, post-complaining, level of satisfaction or 'secondary satisfaction'" (Oliver, 1987, p. 218).

However, complaint management appears to be a double edge blade: on the one hand there is a favourable opportunity to regain customers; on the other hand a poor complaint management procedure can alienate customers forever. The interesting and challenging side of complaint management is that the company can be aware of the given answer and of the future repurchase behavior, but how the response is perceived by a dissatisfied consumer, how this perception influences the satisfaction or dissatisfaction and, consequently, the repurchase intentions stay completely hidden (Gilly, 1987).

According to research, a complaining customer will perceive and then judge the complaints procedure also according to the concept of perceived justice (Blodgett, Granbois and Walters, 1993; Blodgett, Hill and Tax, 1997). This concept can be separated into three different dimensions:

- ◆ **Distributive justice:** related to the specific outcome of the recovery effort
- ◆ **Procedural justice:** related to the adopted set of policies, procedures and criteria used in arriving at the outcome
- ◆ **Interactional justice:** related to the manner in which people are treated during the recovery effort

It is extremely important to consider all the three dimensions involved, avoiding focusing exclusively on one of them. There is not a common agreement about which dimension of justice has the largest impact on consumers (Blodgett, Hill and Tax, 1997, p. 198-199; Kau and Loh, 2006, p. 107) while it is reasonable to think that it is the combination of the three dimensions to determine the overall perception and the subsequent behavior (Blodgett, Hill and Tax, 1997, p. 190). Indeed, a customer can be dissatisfied by a particular complaints procedure if the problem has been completely solved but the procedure is considered too expensive and/or the experienced relationship with the complaint handler has been frustrating. Therefore, the concept of justice should be used when evaluating or establishing complaint handling policies and procedures (Blodgett, Granbois and Walters, 1993, p. 402).

Davidow (2003) has focused on six complaint handling factors which influence the perceived justice of the procedure. These factors, which represent values for customer, are:

- ◆ **Timeliness:** the speed with which organization respond to complaints
- ◆ **Facilitation:** the policies and procedures in place to facilitate complaint handling
- ◆ **Redress:** the actual compensation
- ◆ **Apology:** the psychology compensation
- ◆ **Credibility:** the measures adopted in order to prevent the occurrence of the problem in the future
- ◆ **Attentiveness:** the care and attention offered by the organization or its representatives

Once customers have complained about a product or service and the complaining management has been satisfactory, their behavior and attitude can change. Customers can decide to patronize the product or reuse the service provider. Besides, a positive complaining experience can generate

positive word-of-mouth (Resnik, Gnauck and Aldrich, 1977; Gilly, 1987, p. 297; Blodgett, Wakefield and Barnes, 1995, p. 31, Blodgett, Hill and Tax, 1997, p. 187).

Nevertheless, the so called "recovery paradox", the fact that a successful service recovery can make dissatisfied customers even more satisfied than customers already contented with the product or the service (Seelos and Adamson, 1994, p. 26) needs to be better documented: a successful service recovery is invaluable, but it will not restore customer satisfaction to pre-service failure levels. Trying to "do it right the first time" is still valid (Kau and Loh, 2006). On the contrary, customers dissatisfied also by the complaining procedure are more likely to exit and to choose negative word-of-mouth. This remark stresses the responsibility of companies: "the combination of a failed service encounter and a failed recovery results in a heightened negative response" (Voorhees, Brady and Horowitz, 2006, p. 525). Hardly customers will complain also for a poor complaint handling and no study has been identified on this specific subject.

The particular combination of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with a product or service and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the service recovery process and complaint behavior, allow grouping customers in four distinct categories (Kau and Loh, 2006):

- ◆ Ordinary satisfied customers
- ◆ Dissatisfied non-complainants
- ◆ Satisfied complainants
- ◆ Dissatisfied complainants

6. Managerial issues

It is evident that companies receive only a minimal amount of the potential complaints. Not receiving complaints has a terrific cost independently from the specific product or service involved.

First of all, those who do not offer a second opportunity can reduce the number of customers directly, through exit and, sometimes even more seriously, indirectly, through negative word-of-mouth. On this point, it can be useful to remind that normally the cost of losing a customer is much higher than the cost of satisfying or retaining a customer, nearly five times. Liu and McClure (2001, p. 68) suggest the devastating power of the Internet if used for negative word-of-mouth giving a public dimension to a response normally defined as a private one. In fact, consumers have created many sites for introducing and sharing complaints, sometimes related to a specific product or

company. The reaction of firms toward this form of complaining has been often defensive, registering some domains in advance. However, "rather than adopting a defensive posture, companies should work the Internet to their advantage" facilitating customer complaints (Harrison-Walker, 2001, p. 407).

Not receiving complaints, a company, is deprived of the most valuable information. Any complaint, in fact, is a "free" feedback which can provide essential data otherwise not available. Studies have particularly stressed these aspects of complaints as opportunities (e.g.: Harari, 1999; Plymire, 1991; Sanes, 1993):

- ◆ Complaints help to identify and solve real problems encountered in real experience. For this reason, complaints should be considered even more valuable of any customer satisfaction survey. Complaints can work as a quality control detector
- ◆ Customers who decide to complain can represent other customers who decided to keep silent
- ◆ Complaints help in identifying real customer needs
- ◆ Accepting complaints and solving the related problems, the image of the whole company is improved
- ◆ Complaints can offer invaluable suggestion for developing other products and services
- ◆ An effective complaint management empowers users and encourage an active partnership with customers
- ◆ Receiving and satisfying complaints can reduce the likelihood of legal proceedings
- ◆ An effective complaint management helps keeping loyal customers

Especially for nonprofit sectors, the benefits coming from being consumer-centred can not be measured only in terms of customer retention and incremental profits, but primarily in terms of "providing services that meet customer needs and expectations in the most efficient way" (Seelos and Adamson, 1994, p. 27). It is important to underscore that customer dissatisfaction and consumer complaint behavior are deeply affected by the importance of the service or product and by the severity of the problem. A correct complaint handling, analysis and management will prevent serious accident to happen again and will allow focusing resources on products and services which are important for users (Oh, 2004; 2006). It is true that developing a complaint management system can be expensive; however this system will give important indications on how existing resources are allocated or will identify exactly the shortage of resources as one of the main causes of complaints (Seelos and Adamson, 1994, p. 30).

Managing complaints effectively and successfully is anything but an assumed feature of a company. On the contrary, an effective complaint management has to be wisely projected and firmly incorporated in the standard activities. Companies have focused especially on offensive marketing that is on attracting new customers. In an ever more competitive world companies should focus also on defensive marketing (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1984). Successful complaint management is the core of such a strategy and "an important element for keeping current customers is to demonstrate true commitment when a service failure occurs" (McCole, 2004, p. 345).

First of all, managing complaints needs a radical change in mentality. For a long period, one of the goals of a company has been "complaints reduction" but as stated before, such a goal can be highly counterproductive. Complaints should be seen really as a gift given by customers. Complaints should be managed not reduced or, better, the complaints reduction should be seen as the byproduct of an effective complaints management (Barlow and Møller, 1996).

Knowing the well documented reticence of customers for complaining, complaints should be adequately stimulated through a friendly atmosphere and, more concretely and practically, through offering clear and easy ways for introducing and registering complaints, possibly designed and implemented with the help of customers.

It is extremely important that a positive attitude toward complaints characterizes a company at all levels. First of all, the frontline employees in direct contact with customers who, receiving customer complaints first hand, will play a key-role if adequately "empowered" (Cook and Macaulay, 1997). The top management, in its turn, will analyze complaints and will introduce the consequent improvements of services and products. In short complaints should be considered as meaningful inputs in the decision making process (Kasper, 1985).

Effective complaints handling and management needs, from one side, adequate training, from the other a steadily flowing stream of detailed and not oversimplified information among the different levels of a company (Hsieh, Thomas and Rotem, 2005). Complaints are a particular and valuable form of communication between companies and customers which should be conducted not only in a "consumer initiated" way, but also in a "firm initiated" way (Ross, Oliver, 1985; Richins, 1985b). Through an effective complaint procedure, a company is not only able to offer redress to dissatisfied customers, but also to learn and to efficiently modify its operations (Gilly, Stevenson and Yale, 1991).

However, despite these easily sharable principles, a positive attitude toward complaints is difficult to develop. Complaints enhance a sort of natural resistance, a reactive and defensive attitude, in employees and in managers as well: employees prefer to communicate good news and

managers do not like to hear bad news. This internal dynamic has been carefully studied by Fornell and Westbrook (1984). Many companies have created specific Consumer Affairs Departments also with the task to receive and transmit customer complaints. In reality, the more a Consumer Affairs Department receives complaints, the more this sector is isolated from management and, as a consequence, the less complaints are usefully incorporated and effectively managed. Notwithstanding the boasted attention to customers, many companies still consider complaint management as a cost and not as a source of profit which can give an appreciable contribution to value creation (Stauss and Schoeler, 2004). It is an alarming vicious circle which can be inverted only by prizing and rewarding proactive complaints gathering, a common feature of really customer-focused companies only.

7. CCB and libraries

As shown above, CCB studies have already a long history, the first studies dating toward the middle of the '60s. Even if in 1972 only 12 publications had appeared on the subject (Grønhaug and Zaltman, 1981, p. 121), from 1975 to 1986 the number of papers related to consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaint behavior was five hundreds (Andreasen, 1988, p. 676). Afterwards the trend of these studies seems to decline following "a classic product life cycle pattern (p. 701). This tradition has developed models in order to understand consumer complaint behavior and these models have been applied and discussed either generally or to specific sectors. Indeed these models can be used not only for investigating the reaction of consumers toward products or services affected by failures, but to all the situations characterized by unmet expectations and the consequent dissatisfaction.

As far as libraries are concerned, the consumer complaint behavior has not been deeply investigated. In English, only three studies have been published about the application of the CCB theory to libraries. The three studies, written by the same author (Oh, 2003; 2004; 2006) and related to the same country, South Korea, take into consideration public libraries (2003) and academic libraries (2004; 2006) with the aim of testing the CCB models in these specific environments. However, the specific geographical area studied by Oh should prevent from generalising his findings: in another research (Liu and McClure, 2001), exactly South Korea has been identified as a country characterized by a collectivistic culture, as opposed to the Western individualistic culture, with a remarkable influence on consumer complaint behavior.

In general, the complaining behavior models developed in the marketing field can be applied, with minor revisions, to a nonprofit context like public and academic libraries: "private sector consumers are also public sector consumers and their overall expectations do not become less sophisticated when they put on their public service consumer hat" (Seelos, Adamson, 1994, p. 27). However, particular nonprofit sectors can show different mechanisms (Cermak, File, Prince, 1991).

Some dynamics of the market are affecting libraries too: a decrease of library and information centres users, a decline of resources and a growing competition offered by information-related industries and companies are making it compulsory to manage adequately complaints also in a nonprofit sector. However, at least for academic libraries, it seems that complaining ratios are "much lower than those of users from commercial services or products" (Oh, 2004, p. 141).

For public libraries, the new introduced variable "perception of free use" of the service seems to have a deep effect on CCB, lowering user expectations and increasing tolerance toward service failure (Oh, 2003, p. 58). The "perception of free use" can be therefore considered as an inhibitor of complaints. For academic libraries, instead, the "perception of free use" seems not to have a great influence on complaint behavior but "this might be because university library users rarely think that the library services are free" (Oh, 2004, p. 142-143). Oh suggests, as a future subject, to analyse if the same users have different attitudes when they use public libraries or academic libraries (2006, p. 184).

8. Conclusions

During a period of around forty years, the research on CCB has developed several models in order to explain the basic mechanisms of the complaint behavior and to identify the numerous and heterogeneous variables involved. Despite some differences, due mainly to the extreme complexity of the subject, the proposed models offer some common features.

Gradually, the research on CCB has focused on testing these models in particular geographical and cultural area, considering a singular aspect of the market structure or in relation to specific services and products, libraries included. However, the general framework of CCB seems to be generally accepted. This does not mean that the research on CCB is static and without evolution.

If it is possible to detect a weak point in CCB research is, probably, the lack of a historical perspective. Nobody seems to have tried to analyse the development of complaint behavior generation after generation and some statements of the beginnings of the '70s should be reassessed.

Considering the CCB studies as a whole, two aspects seem constantly present: on the one hand, the fact that consumers voice their complaints only in particular circumstances; on the other hand, the "discovery" of the value of complaints for consumers, companies and for society as well. Nevertheless, few studies have focused on real implementations of effective complaint handling procedures and on the resultant benefits: an ideal field for action research.

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