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Publication Details

Sulaiman, Z., Areni, C. S. & Miller, R. (2009). Flogging in blogs: what drives customers to vent their complaint experiences online?. Proceeding of the ANZMAC 2009 Conference (pp. 1-6). Australian & New Zealand Marketing Academy.

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Abstract

This research refers to dissatisfied consumers posting negative complaints on blogs as "flogging". It qualitatively content analyses the complaints flogged on a non-commercial website, and highlights all complaint channel breakdowns as experienced by both offline and online shoppers. The "open and axial coding" technique with no a priori categories is initially used and followed by "focused coding" where more data are analysed to further refine the categorization and definition of themes. The underlying themes or types of complaint channel failures obtained shed understanding on existing problems faced by consumers with regards to complaint handling management.

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**Flogging in Blogs:
What Drives Customers to Vent Their Complaint Experiences Online?**

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Abstract

This research refers to dissatisfied consumers posting negative complaints on blogs as “flogging”. It qualitatively content analyses the complaints flogged on a non-commercial website, and highlights all complaint channel breakdowns as experienced by both offline and online shoppers. The “open and axial coding” technique with *no a priori categories* is initially used and followed by “focused coding” where more data are analysed to further refine the categorization and definition of themes. The underlying themes or types of complaint channel failures obtained shed understanding on existing problems faced by consumers with regards to complaint handling management.

Keywords: complaint channels, complaints, post purchase, dissatisfaction, flogging

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Introduction

Consumer complaint behaviour (CCB) has caught the attention of both marketing scholars and business managers since 1970s due to its great implications to retailers, consumers and society in general (Bearden and Teel 1983; Blodgett, Hill and Tax, 1997; Hirschman, 1970). The infamous two-level CCB framework by Day and Landon (1977), and its further extension in Day (1980), which systematically distinguish between different complaint responses and actions have inspired more in depth research into CCB (Richins, 1983; Singh, 1988; Singh 1990). With the advent of Internet technology, many traditional bricks and mortar marketplace are transformed into e-commerce and online shops. This shift has encouraged more recent research to be inclined into investigating the CCB in an online environment (Bunker and Bradley, 2007; Harrisson-Walker, 2001; Mattila and Wirtz, 2004; Nasir, 2004). These research denote the increasing importance of an efficient complaint handling management. However, research to comprehend the failure of current complaint channels is nearly non-existent. A proper understanding of consumer's post-purchase behavior, including the media used to elicit complaints and the reasons for their breakdowns, may result in better strategies to address and resolve those complaints (Fornell and Westbrook, 1984).

Many available channels exist for consumers to communicate unsatisfactory marketplace incidents (Goetzinger, 2007) as depicted in Table 1. Complaints can be expressed by interactive channels or remote channels. Face-to-face complaints to personnel or complaining over the phone are the most common direct interactive channels. Written communications such as emails, websites and letters/fax are examples of remote channels for complaining (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004). In face-to-face or phone enquiries, complainers can react immediately if the proposed solution is not satisfactorily offered by the retailer, thus research suggests that consumers with redress seeking (Nyer, 1997) or compensation motivation will use interactive channels rather than the remote ones partly because of the real-time response advantage (Mattila and Wirtz 2004, Zaugg 2006). However, remote complaint channels are desirable for venting frustration and unhappiness and are often utilized by low self-esteem complainers, as these channels allow them to remain anonymous in order to reduce embarrassment. The main benefit of remote channels is the convenience to complain anytime and anywhere. Consumers are not restricted by retail operating hours or required to take a special trip to the retail location, hence these channels are perceived as more cost efficient (Zaugg 2006).

However, websites or blogs designed exclusively to elicit consumer complaints offer the additional advantage of allowing consumers to vent their frustrations and identify the offending company to a potentially large audience. Jackle (2006) found out that almost 75 percent of complainers who turned to a third party website, tend to have complained directly to the company first. Flogging, which was originally meant as fake blogging, is being used today as a powerful and unbiased viral campaign in a broader perspective. Disgruntled consumers who post blogs stemming from their disappointing complaint experiences represent an alternative form of flogging.

The central focus of this exploratory study is to discover patterns in the recourse processes expected by consumers, which are subsequently violated by retailers. What leads customers to vent their frustrations online or to flog when their initial complaints to the company produce

unsatisfactory results? This research analyses the complaint entries submitted to a non-commercial complaint website and highlights all complaint channel breakdowns as experienced by both offline and online shoppers. These complaint channel breakdowns represent failures in retailers' complaint handling management.

Method

This study analyses complaints collected from the consumer complaints website at www.complaints.com. The website receives complaints about online and offline shopping, thus facilitating the comparison of both shopping platforms. The webmasters granted their consent for the researchers to analyse posts on the website and publish any results from the analysis. This complaints web blog is chosen as the data source due to its large databases of complaints contributed by complainers worldwide. It stores diverse blog entries on complaints about different companies and their distinct products or services, and the problem or dissatisfying incidents experienced by the consumers. Consumers are able to read previously posted blog entries by other complainers and are also allowed to write their own complaints about a specific company, product or services.

Three criteria were utilized to identify whether the complaint entry should be included in the analysis and they are as follows: i) There is a specific mention of the platform (online or offline) the consumer used to purchase the products or services, ii) The failing complaint channel(s) is clearly stated (e.g. phone, email, face to face, letter or fax) and iii) The negative response(s) of the complaint channel breakdowns is revealed (e.g. the case of unreturned calls or emails, invalid phone numbers or email addresses, no action being taken by support employees, consumers being treated rudely etc).

The unit of analysis for the content analysis is the combination of words and themes to identify patterns in the data. The coding type used on the first stage of the content analysis was an "open and axial coding" technique as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). In this stage of the research, the content analysis is conducted with *no a priori categories*. Each complaint website entry is examined line-by-line and assigned a representative labels (categories). The categories and sub-categories of complaint channel breakdowns are defined and further refined iteratively by extracting real examples from the website. Only the complaint entries within the month of August 2008 were used for this inductive content analysis exercise. Coding guidelines and category definitions were produced from this stage to capture the key aspects of each theme and to guide further analysis of the raw data. This was further followed by "focused coding" where more data from different months (September to November 2008) were analysed from the complaint website. All themes related to complaint channel breakdowns were coded based on a *priori themes* obtained from the inductive content analysis above. During this second stage of the content analysis, categories were also compared to one another to search for connections or similar emerging themes. These themes are then aggregated to broader categories of complaint channel breakdowns. All three researchers compared their results of content analysis to ensure that the examples and categories were consistent throughout the analysis.

Findings

Previous complaints research highlights the nature of complaints in general (Bunker and Bradley, 2007; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Nasir, 2004), the reasons or motivations to complain (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004), and the descriptive analysis of frequently used complaint channels

(Chen, Huang and Hsaio, 2003). This study extends the dimension of CCB research by focusing on themes directly related to complaint channel failures. Findings from the content analysis indicated that from the 98 complaints analysed, 60% were posted by online shoppers while 40% consisted of offline shoppers. This reflects that, even though the overall market share for online shopping is still low, the percentage of complainers who are also online shoppers is high. This could possibly indicate that there is something systematically wrong in the way online shoppers have been treated while trying to resolve disputes, and it could indicate a general failure of complaint management in the online environment. To summarise, Table 1 presents the frequently encountered complaint channel breakdowns, which are reviewed briefly below:

Table 1: Nine Core Themes of Complaint Channel Failures across Different Channels

Complaint Channel Breakdown	Complaint Channel					Total
	Interactive = 94		Remote = 62			
	Face-to Face	Phone	Email	Website	Letter/Fax	
Unreturned or No Response	0	10	12	1	0	23
Invalid or Not Available	0	4	0	2	0	6
No Urgency	1	7	4	1	0	13
Transferred	2	11	5	1	1	20
Inaction, Hanging or Unresolved	1	15	10	0	0	26
No Action due to Policy	2	9	7	0	0	18
Extended Delay	0	11	7	0	0	18
Incompetence or Wrong Solution	1	9	5	2	0	17
Rudeness	2	9	4	0	0	15
Total	9	85	54	7	1	

Unreturned or no response – Among the highest failures of complaint channels are related to emails or phone calls not being answered at all. This is exemplified by the following quotes from the complaint website. The “no response” episodes resulted in consumers being unsuccessful with their attempts to make any initial contact with the company. This theme supports the findings from a study by Nasir (2004) on consumer complaints about online stores.

“The Reward Depot would not answer any emails requesting my password and user name to check status of my “Free” prize.” [Complaint #: 187417]

“All the other Air India numbers I’ve looked up online don’t answer (they just ring and ring) so it’s not a very convincing system all around.” [Complaint #: 184084]

Invalid or not available – There are also cases where the numbers or email addresses posted on the company’s website or given by the company’s personnel are invalid or wrong as indicated in these quotes:

“I also find it inappropriate that there is actually no escalation path or e-mail address on the MLB.com site.” [Complaint #: 187676]

“The Michigan call center proceeded to give an incorrect number for the CA/NV customer complaint center.” [Complaint #: 187401]

No urgency – One of the recurring themes through all the complaints is the ability for complainers to attain service recovery only after several tries, as indicated in the below quotes:

“I did receive emails from them after 19 emails were sent.” [Complaint # 187417]

There are also cases where a long duration of time has passed before any response is received from the company as expressed below:

*“Two months later, they finally opened the box, then **after many emails and phone calls**, agreed to repair it!” [Complaint #: 187601]*

Transferred – Some complaints, as illustrated below, indicate that calls or emails are being passed around, forwarded and transferred from one employee to another:

*“Everytime I call, the manager is not in or "busy", a few times I am **transferred**, I am on hold for at least an hour.. sometimes 3 hours.” [Complaint #: 187697]*

*“I called back, got another service tech person after being **transferred 3 times.**” [Complaint #: 184076]*

Inaction, hanging or unresolved – It is apparent through the content analysis that consumers are not satisfied when no remedial actions are taken by the support employees or the responsible parties in the company. Many consumers are left without any updates or acknowledgements on their complaints whereas in some cases the complaints are being left hanging with broken promises given by the retailers and service providers.

*“I contacted the company via email numerous times, only to be told they would get a new pump out to us right away. Its now September, and **still nothing.**” [Complaint #: 184102]*

*“I called the Walgreen district office (205-682-8078) and they said they would call me back **but have not done so yet.**” [Complaint #: 184099]*

No action due to company policy – Another emergent theme from the analysis is that consumers are disappointed when the support representative cites company policy as the restrictions for them not executing a proper remedy for the disputes.

*“I received another email from Robbie stating that once the vehicle is loaded on the truck, he is done and that **legally everything is out of his hands and no longer controls it** and that I can "seek and demand all you (I) want".” [Complaint #: 184110]*

*“Despite my complaints the Post Master General claims there is nothing he can do because there is **no proof of the contents worth and no proof the carrier is guilty of theft.**” [Complaint #: 187466]*

*“I tried to return it to the **AT&T store** and they said "you can only return the iphone to an **Apple store**".” [Complaint #: 184191]*

Extended delay – When a service representative’s recovery efforts failed to honour the time frame or promised delivery time, the consumer unhesitatingly complained to the website as manifested by the quotes below:

*“I phoned Tata who is 6 km away from where it broke down. They **only arrived 8 hours later** to tow it.” [Complaint #: 187446]*

*“I called a service technician. He said I needed a new part #74008806. After **waiting for two weeks for the part** and continuing to hear "**the order is in process**", I called and was told that the order is on "back order" and is not available until October 30th.” [Complaint #: 187396]*

Incompetence or wrong solution – Some consumers took steps to retaliate against the company by complaining when they were dissatisfied with the company’s attempt to rectify the problem. Although some remedial measures have been taken, the dissatisfying situation remains not corrected or unimproved due to support employee’s lack of knowledge or experience on the subject matter under complaint and inept of complaint handling skills.

*“I kept calling and each time they sent someone who made the **problem worse.**” [Complaint #: 187430]*

*“I was on the phone with the tech support person in India for 1 1/2 hours. He then disconnected me. My computer **had more problems now then when I called.**” [Complaint #: 184076]*

Rudeness – In some cases, consumer attempts at obtaining service recovery via the complaint channels resulted in rude treatments rendered by the service personnel. The following quotes stated that consumers are dissatisfied when the employees hung up on them, lashed out harsh words, provoked the consumers and even took side of problematic co-worker. This theme coincides with the findings emerged from previous studies of complaint nature by Harrison-Walker (2001) and Bunker and Bradley (2007), where employee rudeness seems to top the reasons for customer complaints.

*“AT&T very **rudely informed me** that I could take it to the nearest Apple store to be fixed (90 miles away) or just be happy with my broken phone. [Complaint #: 18419]”*

*“And the manager I dealt with - called Maz - was extremely unprofessional. Not only did he fail to phone me back after promising to, but when I said that Man Utd was the best club in the world and that I just wanted its customer service to match that, he **hung up on me.**” [Complaint #: 187359]*

Discussion

This exploratory study provides insights into the nature of the complaint channel breakdowns in both offline and online shopping environment. It is apparent that most consumers flogged their complaints due to problems encountered with phone and email complaint channels. Some themes of channel breakdowns such as unreturned emails or phone calls and employee’s rudeness coincide with the previous research on consumer complaints as mentioned in Harrison-Walker (2001), Nasir (2004), and Bunker and Bradley (2007), while others are novel themes discovered in this study for instance, the invalid customer service numbers or emails, no urgency in responding to consumer complaints, calls or emails being transferred, inaction or hanging complaint cases, no action by the support representative due to company policy, extended delay in delivering the promised recovery efforts, and support employees are incompetent in handling the complaint situation. All these emerging themes contribute to the empirical evidence of complaint channel failures.

Some limitations of this research should be noted. There is no empirical assessment of inter-coder reliability and as such, future research should test for inter-coder reliability to ensure the consistency of the data. It is also expected that there was some self-selection bias, where only complaints that met the pre-set guidelines were selected. This requires further investigation in later research, to ensure more generalisability to all consumer complaints regardless of the shopping platform.

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