

## Consumers' complaining behavior. An exploratory research

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*Abstract:* Nowadays company's profitability and viability depend considerably by the way that this company administrates its clients' satisfaction and especially dissatisfied experiences (Cătoi, Bolog 2006). The dissatisfied clients will tell to other clients about their negative experience, they will change their attitude about the product or service; they will register their complaint that will affect in a negative way the company's image and the company's products' perception.

The authors of this article want to contribute to the improvement of the complaining behavior of the dissatisfied clients, considering the fact that in our country researchers in this area are modest. In this purpose it was developed a pilot survey which objectives were referring to building a socio-demographical profile of the consumer that register complaining. Data gathered and analyzed from an 112 persons sample living in Alba Iulia, lead to the conclusion that the majority are recording their complaints when are dissatisfied by a product or a service, no matter their gender, they have high monthly incomes, they have a high education level or are private entrepreneurs, and they are young.

The accomplished research represents a theoretical and empirical background of a future research that will contribute to a better understanding in this area.

*Key Words:* consumer, complaints, complaining behavior, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, consumers' rights

### 1 Introduction

The management of consumers' complaints represents an important aspect of the marketing activity of any organization. A major difficulty that these companies might have consists in understanding the way in which their clients respond to dissatisfaction.

Exploratory research developed had as purpose the identification of some demographic variables that are influencing the complaining behavior, such as age, monthly income and the socio-professional category.

The assumptions from which this research starts consist in the fact that there are demographic differences among those who file a complaint and those who don't do this when they are dissatisfied with a product, service or commercial unit.

In Romania were conducted few studies concerning the consumers' complaints behaviour. Accordingly, the main purpose of this study consists in a better understanding of how dissatisfied consumers react. For this reason, the pilot survey carried out for gathering

information has the character of an exploratory research, without any pretension of generalizing the results.

### 2 Literature review

Complaining behavior occurs after the acquisition and consumption of a product or a service when the consumer is dissatisfied (Bearden & Teel 1983; Folkes, Koletsky and Graham 1987). According to the non-confirmation paradigm, developed by Oliver in 1980, a consumer will be dissatisfied when the perceived performance of the product is below his expectations formed before the purchase.

Jacoby and Jaccard (1981) define the complaining behavior as being "an action made by an individual in order to communicate a negative aspect concerning a product or a service either to the producing or distributing company or to a third organization".

Day et al. (1981) suggests in one of their studies that the consumer's dissatisfaction may have important

implications such as changing the attitude towards the brand or boycotting the selling points.

The complaints are a response to dissatisfaction and their attainment highly depends on the dissatisfaction's intensity (Yi 1990). While the dissatisfaction is a mainly affective response, the complaining behaviour is a rather cognitive response. The factors influencing the complaints behaviour are closely related to the individual predisposition to complain, to the opportunity of filing a complaint, to the procedure of filing a complaint or the consumer's lack of information.

The research conducted in the field highlighted the associations between the complaining behaviour on one hand, and the gender of the dissatisfied consumers who file complaints (Duhaime and Ash 1980), different personal and situational factors (Day 1984), the socio-professional category and the income (Jacoby and Jaccard 1981), the life style, the values and demographical characteristics (Morgansky and Buckley 1986), on the other hand.

With regard to consumer's reaction to dissatisfaction, most research paid particular attention to the complaining behaviour as a consequence of his dissatisfaction (Andreassen 2001, Ved 1991). It is estimated that there are many types of consumer's responses to dissatisfaction, namely: taking no action, changing the product / brand, switching the supplier, filing a complaint to the seller, producer or a third person/institution, telling other people about the product that dissatisfied him (Goodwin, Ross 1990).

The complaining behaviour, as a reaction to dissatisfaction, varies considerably from one consumer to another. Most often, consumers take no action in order to reduce or eliminate the problems encountered on the market. Day and Bodur showed that most of the dissatisfaction cases for which no action was taken occur in the case of perishable goods (49.6%), followed by durable goods (29.4%) and services (23.2 %).

The results of different studies have led to the conclusion that a large number of dissatisfied consumers do not file a complaint (Davidow, Dacin 1997, Jeffery ş.a. 1995, Valenzuela ş.a. 2002). This lack of action could have a negative impact for both marketers and consumers. First, by not expressing the dissatisfaction, the consumers are deprived of obtaining a recovery of this unpleasant experience for them. Second, the limited actions of the consumers do nothing but hide the problems of the market that the company should correct. Additionally, the company sees the consumer's complaints as an important source of information for

making some decisions about creating more competitive products.

There are studies that have attempted to establish profiles of the consumers who complain the dissatisfaction and have tried to find answers to questions like: "What types of consumers are willing to file complaints?", "What are the differences between the consumers that file complaints and those who compliment?", etc. (Cordoş 2003, Dong-Geun, 2003, Lau ş.a. 2001).

When establishing such profiles, the authors considered especially the demographic variables such as income, occupation, education, age, marital status, social integration, mobility, etc. According to Robinson and Berl, consumers who file complaints are generally young, have a relatively higher income and were not loyal to a brand even when they were satisfied. Also, it is appreciated that the complaints are filed only by those dissatisfied consumers who have enough resources to do this and have high expectations regarding their resolution.

Regarding the relationship between the complaints behavior and the product's characteristics, some authors (Keng 1995) concluded that it is more likely to file a complaint for products that do not demonstrate their performance, and this may have a negative impact on the company's image. It was also demonstrated that there is a direct link between the product's price and the complaining behavior: the higher the price for a product, the higher probability for a dissatisfied consumer to file a complaint (Keng ş.a. 1995).

In one of their studies, Gronhaug and Zaltman (1981) describe three patterns of the complaining behavior, called the resources, learning and personality patterns. The resources pattern takes into account the access to time, money and power as determinants of the complaining behavior; the learning model suggests that the complaints will be filled by experienced and better educated consumers as they know their rights better, regarding the personality model, the consumers who file complaints are more aggressive and more confident in themselves than those who do not file a complaint.

### 3 Problem formulation

A pilot survey was conducted in a shopping center, on a sample of 112 people, inhabitants of Alba Iulia. In the survey's questionnaire was included a "filter" question, placed at the beginning, which sought to exclude from

the sample the ones who were not dissatisfied with the product or service: "Have you ever been dissatisfied with a product or service?" With the help of closed and mixed questions there were obtained information on the complaining behaviour of those included in the sample.

The research objectives were established as:

- (1) Identifying the extent to which the dissatisfied consumers have filed a complaint based on gender, income, age or socio-professional category;
- (2) Identifying the reason for which the dissatisfied consumers have not filed a complaint;
- (3) Identifying the organization to which the complaint was filed (distributor, producer or state authority);
- (4) Identifying the type of product/service for which they filed a complaint;
- (5) Identifying the repurchase intentions.

Research's hypotheses were formulated in this shape:

- (1)  $H_0$ : statistically gender influences insignificant the measure in which the dissatisfied clients are register their complaints;
- (2)  $H_0$ : statistically monthly income influences in a significant way the measure in which the dissatisfied clients are recording their complaints.

#### 4 Problem solution

Of the 112 questioned subjects, 6 persons (respectively 5,53%) said that they have never been dissatisfied with a purchased product or service.

Considering the dissatisfied clients, 70,80% had no ulterior action, and the difference of 29,20% recorded a complaint. It is important to underline that those consumers that recorded a complaint they are not doing this each time when they are unsatisfied, but they have done it at least one time.

As it can be observed from the table below (Table 1), among those that recorded a claim 62% are men, and among those that had no action 56% are women.

**Table 1. Complaining behavior depending on investigated persons' gender**

Investigated persons' gender	Complain	
	Yes	No
Women	38%	56%
Men	62%	44%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%

Source: realized by author based on research data

Null hypothesis " $H_0$ : statistically gender influences insignificant the measure in which the dissatisfied clients are register their complaints " was verified using  $\chi^2$  Test. For 1 degree of freedom and 0,05 significance level, the calculated value for  $\chi^2$  ( $\chi^2$  calculated = 2,623) was situated under the level of  $\chi^2$  theoretic ( $\chi^2$  theoretic = 3, 841), so the null hypothesis is accepted. In conclusion, statistically there are no significant differences between women and men regarding the complaining behavior.

From the data presented in the table bellow (Table 2) it can be observed that the ones that are not recording complaints are with modest monthly incomes (49,30% of all), while the dissatisfied consumers that are recording complaints have monthly income above the average (48,50% of all).

Null hypothesis " $H_0$ : statistically monthly income influences in a significant way the measure in which the dissatisfied clients are recording their complaints" was verified using  $\chi^2$  Test. The calculated value for  $\chi^2$  was 16,87 and it is higher than the theoretical value of  $\chi^2$  for 2 degrees of freedom and a 0,05 significance level. In conclusion the null hypothesis is not accepted, so the complaining behavior is significantly depending on the consumers' monthly income.

**Table 2. Complaining behavior depending on the investigated subjects' income category**

Income category (personal, monthly average)	Complain	
	Yes	No
Bellow 1000 lei	19,3%	49,3%
1001-2000 lei	32,2%	37,3%
Above 2000 lei	48,5%	13,4%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%

Source: realized by author based on research data

Private entrepreneurs, high education level persons and clerks that are recording their claims when they are dissatisfied in a bigger measure than the rest of the socio-professional categories (Table 3). One possible explanation of this result could be that the persons that are included in these socio-professional categories know better their rights as consumers.

**Table 3. Complaining behavior depending on the investigated subjects' socio-professional category**

Socio-professional category	Complain	
	Yes	No
Pupil	-	6,66%
Student	6,4%	8%
Worker	3,2%	30,6%
Clerk	22,5%	10,6%
High education level	25,8%	6,66%
Private entrepreneur	29,03%	9,33%
Domestic	3,2%	9,33%
Unemployed	3,2%	6,66%
Retired	6,4%	5,33%
Other category	-	6,66%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: realized by author based on research data

Considering the age, claiming behavior is specific to the people with the age bellow 40 years old (Table no. 4). The dissatisfied consumers that have above 60 years are recording complaints in a small measure.

**Table 4. Complaining behavior depending on the investigated subjects' age category**

Age category	Complain	
	Yes	No
16 – 25 years	24%	6,45%
26 – 40 years	52%	25,8%
41- 60 years	22,66%	54,8%
Above 60 years	1,33%	12,9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: realized by author based on research data

The lack of trust regarding the problem solving is the main reason for which the most of the investigated subjects are not recording complaints when they are dissatisfied. As well, the ones that are not recording complaints do not record them because of their lack of time (34,66%) or appreciate that the product represented for them a small importance (12%) (Fig. 1).

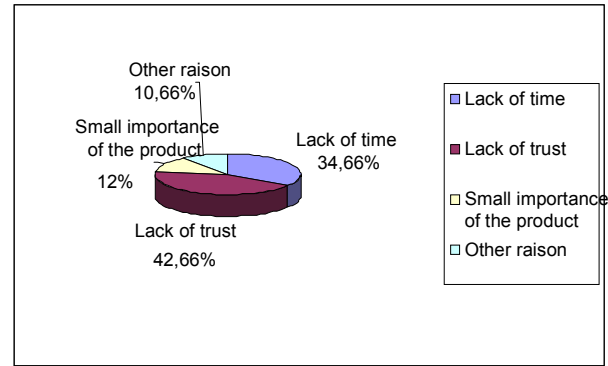


Fig. 1. Weight of the persons that are not recording complaints depending on the reason for which they are not recording complaints

Source: realized by author based on research data

Among the subjects that had recorded the majority (45,33%) had addressed to the distributor/selling point from where they purchased the product related to which they were dissatisfied and the smaller part of them (20%) directly to the producer (Fig. 2).

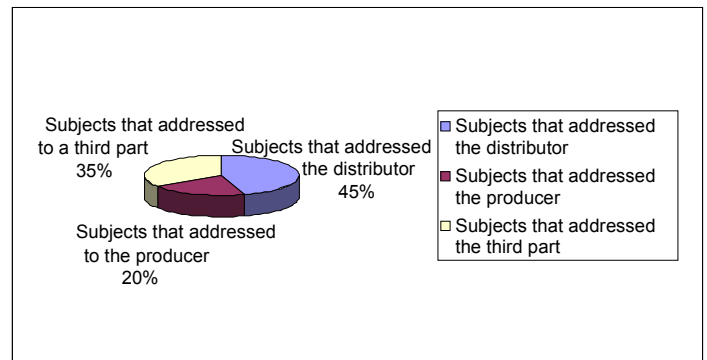


Fig. 2. Weight of consumers that recorded complaints depending on the recording point

Source: realized by author based on research data

From the total of 75 unsatisfied consumers that have recorded complaints, the biggest part of them registered their complains related to long term using products (respectively 50%) and for services (29%). In case of unsatisfied clients related to the perishable products, had been recorded complaints by 21% of the subjects investigated.

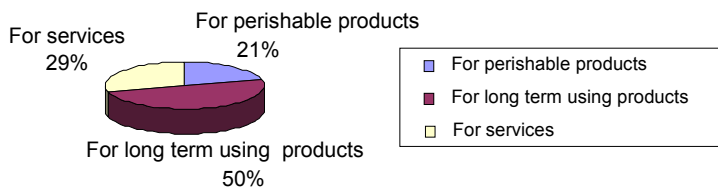


Fig. 3. Weight of registered complaints depending on the products category

Source: realized by author based on research data

The dissatisfied consumers that had recorded complaints and were solved (their number representing 43% of the total subjects that recorded complaints) intend in a big measure to repeat the purchase, while the ones that were dissatisfied and did not recorded their complaints do not intend to repeat the purchase.

## 5 Conclusions

The exploratory research developed allowed to made some conclusions.

First of all, complaining behavior is influenced by demographical variables like gender, monthly income, age and socio-professional category. Statistically there are not significant differences between the women's complaining behavior and the men's complaining behavior, but statistically there are significant differences between the complaining behaviors of the subjects belonging to different monthly income category.

The subjects that are recording their complaints when they are dissatisfied by a product or a services are usually young with high education level.

In the second place, the main raisons for which part of the dissatisfied consumers do not record their complaints is related to the lack of time and to the lack of trust that their problems will be solved.

In the third place, consumers recorded their complaints first at the selling point where they purchased the products and less to a third part.

Generally the complaints were made for long term using products and services and less for perishable products;

The dissatisfied consumers that recorded a complaint and this was solved are willing to repeat the purchase unlike the ones that were dissatisfied and did not had any action.

The conclusions resulting after the exploratory research are underlying the importance of future studies, especially due to the managerial implications of complaining behavior researches. In this way, the companies which want to increase the number of dissatisfied consumers who complain should facilitate this and also should assure them that their problems will be solved. Also, these companies should focus on dissatisfied consumers who complain to identify those socio-demographic characteristics that make them to have a positive attitude regarding complaining behavior.

## 6 Limits

The main limit of this study consists in that of the fact that the results cannot be generalized because the inquiry developed has the characteristics of the pilot survey and the sample is statistically unrepresentative.

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