



**«Friendly» complaining behaviors: toward a relational approach**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The relational approach is often presented as a strategy to retain customers, but can also be an appropriate approach to encourage consumers to complain, as a literature review shows it.

Using information contained in complaints and giving right answers (distributive, procedural and interactional) to such complaints is essential. Relational marketing can also be used to orient consumers (but not all of them) to complain on certain products/services attributes. This article focuses on these issues and should stimulate further research in this new field.

## **RESUME**

L'approche relationnelle est souvent présentée comme une stratégie permettant de retenir les consommateurs. Elle peut aussi être une approche appropriée pour inciter les consommateurs à exprimer leur mécontentement et leurs problèmes.

Il est primordial pour une entreprise de savoir utiliser les informations contenues dans les réclamations et de leur apporter les bonnes réponses (justice procédurale, distributive et interactionnelle). Mais le marketing relationnel doit être utilisé sur des segments de consommateurs bien déterminés et sur certains attributs seulement. Cet article étudie ces questions et propose de nouvelles voies de recherche.

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## INTRODUCTION

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During the last two decades, the nature of supplier-customer relationships has been changing dramatically in many markets. Managing relationships with customers and suppliers is also gaining widespread recognition, among academic researchers as well as among industrial practitioners, mainly in some industries such as the car industry or distribution channels. Even if this evolution does not appear in all industries, it is a movement that cannot be ignored.

It appears that many industrial firms try to establish close relationships with their business partners -suppliers, distributors, clients, etc. - (Heide, 1987). This relational trend is complementary and sometimes opposite to the one based on transactions. Macneil (1980) speaks of a transactional/relational exchange continuum. Are these distinct positions, or can we speak of a balance between the two tendencies? With a discrete contract no relation exists between the parties apart from the simple exchange of goods. Its paradigm is the transaction of the neoclassical microeconomics (Macneil, 1980, p.10). But modern contractual relations tend to involve large numbers of people, to be durable, and to involve more aspects than the mere object of the contract. There is a social dimension to the exchange that is totally ignored in the transactional exchange (Dwyer, Schurr et Oh, 1987). But the transactional as well as the relational dimensions are taken into account which lead to the idea of a continuum.

Traditional marketing with the transactional dimension remains important. The relational dimension is fundamental in marketing today but not for all economic sectors or customers: some economic sectors are not relevant to this new type of marketing (*e.g.*, industries where you buy very rarely; for instance a house for a family) ; some customers are not ready to implement relationship marketing (*e.g.*, some customers have a very low potential for long term relationships). What one customer may consider a warm, close, «friendly» relationship, will be stifling or unnecessary for others. For instance, in a focus group conducted by Barnes (1997, p.771), a bank customer indicated that he had an ideal relationship with his bank. When asked to describe the relationship, he replied: « I don't call them, and they don't call me! ».

The relational approach is often presented as a strategy to retain customers. Most firms are trying to increase their customer loyalty rate by developing a strategy of relationship marketing (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990)

Retaining customers has become a primary concern. The success of most industrial products depends on repeated buying: And companies do their best to respond to « valid » complaints and to restore satisfaction whenever possible (Barksdale, Hargrove & Powell, 1984).

Customers' loyalty is extremely important for companies since:

1. switching creates costs to the firm: the customer's future revenue stream (a loss from the high margin sector very often -Keaveney, 1995-);
2. the investment to get new customers is far more costly than the one required to retain old ones (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

The study of consumer complaining behavior and its consequences is essential and critical in the explanation and prediction of consumer repurchasing intentions and brand loyalty for three reasons (Singh, 1988; Day, 1984; Engel & Blackwell, 1982; Richins, 1983):

1. Complaints give valuable information about the firm's dysfunctional behaviors and its products/services failures (Dart & Freeman, 1994; Hansen, Swan & Powers, 1996). If a customer leaves without saying anything, he alone retains this essential information. For this reason, complaints are very interesting and constructive.
2. Moreover, if the firm answers properly and rapidly to his/her complaint, the consumer can reach a second-order satisfaction.
3. Overall, it has been shown that when a consumer is satisfied by the response to his complaint, he becomes more loyal than other consumers (Lapidus & Pinkerton, 1995).

Despite this growing interest in consumer complaining behaviors (with a few exceptions -e.g., Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1988; Dacin & Davidow, 1997-), very few researchers argue that it is important to encourage consumers to complain. This same pattern is true with the investigation of appropriate organizational responses to various complaint behaviors.

As already said, using information contained in complaints and giving right answers to such complaints is important. How can a company give the right answers and stimulate a « positive » complaining behavior from the consumer. The objective is to stimulate complaining behavior leading to useful information. A «friendly» complaint provides signals about the need to reconsider attributes important to the company and on which the company thinks it is able to respond quickly?

The literatures on consumer complaining behaviors, on justice theory and on relational marketing tend to suggest that relationship marketing is a way to develop «friendly» complaints, even if some precautions must be observed.

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## 1. CONSUMER COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR CONCEPTUALIZATION

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The literature explaining complaining behaviors by final consumers belongs to a larger stream of research about consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Bearden & Mason, 1984; Day, 1984; Day & Landon, 1977; Jacoby & Jaccard, 1981). In this paper, the focus is on consumer complaining behaviors and not on the sources of dissatisfaction and their elimination.

Not all complaints and complaining behaviors are considered hereafter. First, among complaining behavior, only «justified» or «valid» complaints are of interest in the «friendly» complaints field. It is well known that some customers consider complaining as part of a game in order to make the best possible deal with the supplier (Bearden & Mason, 1984; Kowalski, 1996); and these behaviors are well studied through the game theory -these customers complain at any time, for any reason-.

Second, only the complaints which are explicitly expressed to the firm are considered. They are the only ones which give the opportunity to an organization to get enough information to respond quickly and positively to a service/product deficiency or failure and to up-date the product/service information system.

These «justified» and «explicit» complaints can be useful in the Business-to-Business and the Business-to-Consumer contexts. No systematic distinction between these two domains is required for our discussion (when the developments are valid in both types of situations).

### **1.1. Definition and taxonomies and «friendly» complaints:**

Though several definitions of complaining behavior have been proposed, there is a large agreement about the conceptual meaning of consumer complaining behavior.

Consumer complaining behavior is believed to be triggered by feelings or emotions of perceived dissatisfaction (Day, 1984). Without this feeling of dissatisfaction the complaint cannot be considered as a real complaining behavior, but as a «game theory» behavior and a «negotiation» tool.

Complaining behaviors triggered by a perceived dissatisfaction can result into some action or into no-action. In the first case, complaining behavior is named «behavioral complaining behavior» (exit, voice, third party, *e.g.* any consumer actions that convey an expression of dissatisfaction). In the second case, it is named «non-behavioral complaining behavior» (no-action and the consumer tries to forget the dissatisfaction -loyalty-). This distinction behavioral/action - non behavioral/no action was made for the first time by Hirschman (1970). All the other taxonomies, later on (except the one by Richins (1983)) are based on this distinction between behavioral and non behavioral complaints.

The «friendly» complaint needs an explicit complaint that is which has to be voiced and a complaint to which the company can respond. That is the reason why, among the complaints' taxonomies, the complaints of interest in a «friendly» complaint perspective will be identified

a) Hirschman (1970, p.81) considers three options that face a dissatisfied consumer: exit<sup>1</sup>, voice and loyalty. Hirschman notes that exit and voice responses annihilate efforts and motivation on the part of the consumer.

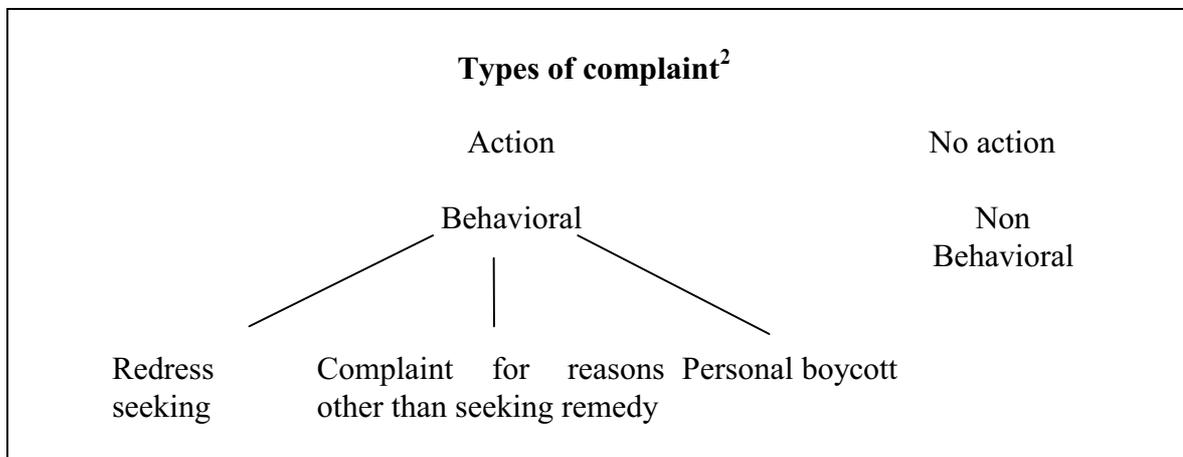
b) Based on this work, Day & Landon (1977) propose a two-level hierarchical classification scheme. The first level distinguishes behavioral from non behavioral responses (*i.e.*, action/ no action). The second level represents the distinction between public (*e.g.*, third party, large audience, etc.) and private action (*e.g.*, boycott, family circle, etc.). This classification has not been tested.

c) In order to improve Day's & Landon's work, Day (1980) suggests another basis for classification at the second level of the previous taxonomy (Cf. Figure 1). He notes that consumers complain (or do not complain) to achieve specific objectives. In fact, consumers can provide various explanations for the complaint action they undertake. So Day proposes that the 'purpose' of complaining can be used to classify consumer behavior into three categories:

1. seeking redress;
2. complaining for reasons other than seeking remedies (to affect future behavior, to persuade others, to take legal actions, etc.);
3. as a means of expressing personal boycott.

**FIGURE 1**

**Day's taxonomy of consumer complaining behaviors (1980)**



d) Singh (1988) introduces a slightly different taxonomy. When dissatisfaction, occurs three types of complaining behaviors can be found:

1. voice responses (seeking redress from the seller or no action);
2. private responses (word-of-mouth communication);
3. third-party responses (implementing legal action).

<sup>1</sup> We must note that exit is either switching from one brand to another or more radically immediately refusing to buy the category of product or service.

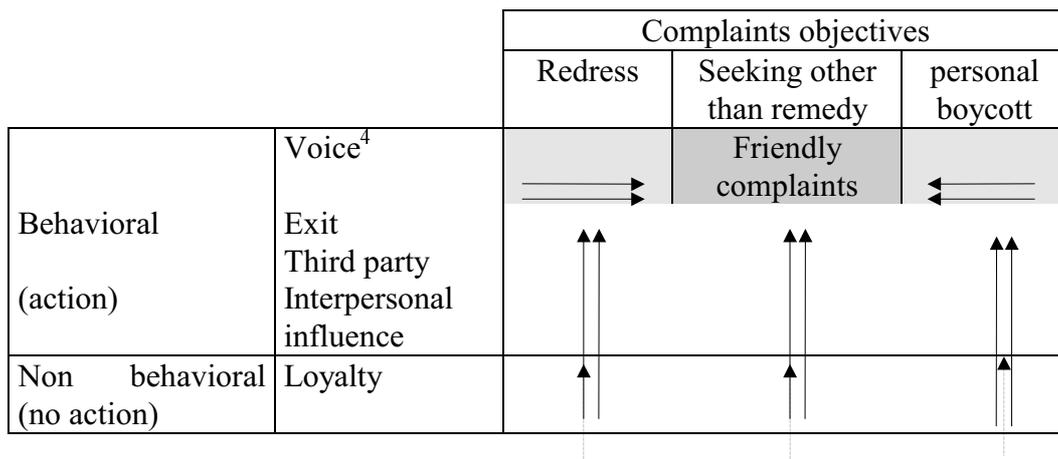
<sup>2</sup> We keep here Day's terminology, but a better term would be «consumer reactions».

e) Finally, Richins (1983) notes that complaining involves at least three distinct activities: (a) switching brands/stores/service providers (defined as exit), (b) making a complaint to the seller (defined as voice), and (c) telling others about the unsatisfactory experience (which constitute negative word-of-mouth). She indicates a fourth possibility which is complete inaction (the consumer keeps his/her dissatisfaction for him/herself and tries to forget the experience). Most of the customers adopt this fourth possibility. Except for the fourth reason, these answers can be linked together.

The dimensions operationally useful, in «friendly» complaints perspective, can be pointed out:

1. a behavioral complaint which is voiced;
2. a complaint aimed at (1) seeking redress, (2) seeking something other than remedy, or (3) personal boycott. These aims will be reached through voice responses<sup>3</sup>. For this reason, a focus of the «friendly» complaint strategy is to transform non behavioral complaints into behavioral complaints and non-voiced complaints into voiced complaints, the final objective being in an economic manner but also through a «friendly» approach (Cf. figure 2). These different types of responses are not exclusive from one another.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Possible scope of «friendly» complaints**



**1.2. The attitude and propensity toward complaining**

The attitude toward complaining is conceptualized as the overall effect of «goodness» or «badness» of complaining towards sellers and is not specific to a given episode of dissatisfaction.

Some researchers have shown that consumer’s dispositions to complain are correlated with some personality orientations including assertiveness, alienation, self-confidence, locus of control and self-monitoring (Bearden and Mason, 1984). In addition, learning theories suggest that consumers develop more positive attitudes toward complaining when they become more familiar with complaining practices and environment (e.g.,

<sup>3</sup> only in the sense of seeking redress from the seller, informing and influencing public opinion or relatives.

<sup>4</sup> Voice to the seller/supplier.

knowledge of unfair practices, consumer rights and complaint channels) and when they have to face complaining experiences with positive outcomes. Therefore, in a « friendly » complaints context, the firms have to work on these learning processes since they want to develop complaining behaviors. There exists several ways to do so, such as communicate through advertising the firm's complaint handling policy, giving an in-store complaint policy information while the customer is making his choice, communicating through the service warranty in the contract.

The basis of a « friendly » complaint is a « voiced » and « well-treated » complaint. One must bear in mind Hirschman's observation (1970) that customers may take no action even when dissatisfied if they are loyal to the seller or if they perceive that complaining to the seller (or the supplier) is probably pointless. But the seller can increase the propensity to complain through encouraging the complaint to be voiced and convincing the consumer that the complaint will be taken care of.

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## 2. A NEW APPROACH TO 'FRIENDLY'<sup>a</sup> COMPLAINTS THROUGH THE JUSTICE THEORY

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All complaints do not have the same status. As mentioned, some of them are « calculated » complaints (game theory). Some others are motivated by a willingness to improve the society well-being. But most of them seem to be the consequence of the customers' willingness to get redress after a disconfirmation or a harmful experience.

Hansen & al. (1996) use the concept of « friendly » complaints. In their work, they refer to the adjective « friendly » because « complaining can be desirable for the marketer » (Hansen & al., 1996, p.271-272).

Developing and managing « friendly » complaints deserve attention since a firm which does not receive any claim has probably important problems of upward information.

But « friendly » complaints can be desirable only in some cases. And it is valuable for the marketer to develop complaining behavior in these specific cases.

The justice theory helps understanding the customers expectations when complaining. Justice theory and its potential applications in the context of « friendly » complaints is presented below.

### **2.1. «Friendly» complaints: Two conditions for being efficient?**

A « friendly » complaint has to attain its objective, that is to be desirable for the marketer. The desirability depends on:

1. the quality and quantity of information generated by the complaints;
2. the capacity of the firm to respond positively and quickly to these complaints.

The quality of the complaints is related to the reliability of the information provided (that is the accuracy of the information, the credibility of the source; in other words the credibility of the customers who complain). The quantity of information rests on the capacity of the firm to stimulate the customers «complaining » behavior in two ways: (1) sending systematically useful information about one's firm or its competitors; (2)

inciting « shy » customers or customers who do not express themselves to complain «friendly» (Cf. Figure 2).

The capacity of the firm to respond to these complaints signifies that «friendly» complaints make sense only when the firm is capable of responding quickly and efficiently to these complaints. A «friendly» complaint may turn to its opposite if the company capacity to respond is weak.

Therefore, the conditions for «friendly» complaints to be efficient are:

- to be complaints of reliable customers;
- to be complaints about attributes on which the firm has a strong capacity of response or a competitive advantage. Whenever these conditions are not fulfilled, it can be supposed that « friendly » complaints will have more negative than positive effects as the literature review on justice theory makes us think.

Finally, a « friendly » complaint strategy makes sense if it is applied to segments of customers particularly important to the firm, *i.e.* « high margin » customers or « long-term » customers. Indeed, it is important to give high margin customers the perception that the firm cares about their problems and concerns (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990) and long term customers have quite a good knowledge of the firm, of its products/services. Their feedback is of high interest.

## **2.2. Justice theory and «friendly» complaints**

The focus on « good » (reliable, high-margin, long-term) customers may be excellent but risky since the firm has to give the right answer at the right time; otherwise this « friendly » complaint policy might become very dangerous.

The justice literature suggests that each part of a sequence of a buying and a complaining process is subject to fairness considerations and that each aspect of a complaint resolution creates a justice episode (Tax, Brown & Chandrashekar, 1998). A literature review is important to help understanding the responses to be given to « friendly » complaints and the sensitive dimensions in a complaining behavior. Tax *et al.* (1998) identify three dimensions to the justice: distributive, procedural and interactional. Perceived justice has been found to be the main determinant of complainants' negative word-of-mouth behavior and their repatronage intentions. It has been found to mediate the effects of likelihood of success, attitude toward complaining, product importance, and stability and controllability on complaining behavior (Blodgett, Granbois, Walters, 1993).

Theories based on *distributive justice* focus on the allocation of benefits and costs. They use equity principles and the customer may assess the fairness of the compensation differently on the basis of his (her):

- prior experience with the firm in question and/or other firms;
- awareness of other customers' resolutions;
- and, perceptions of his (her) own loss (Tax, Brown & Chandrashekar, 1998).

Distributive justice responds to economic costs but also to emotional costs and therefore the response itself will be economic (and based on equity) and affective. Distributive justice will then be found in the evaluation of compensation for financial loss (economic response) and an apology. The apology will give satisfaction on the emotional side. The

importance of the apology may differ from Business-to-Business to Business-to-Consumer<sup>5</sup>. However, distributive justice cannot be analyzed without considering also procedural justice and interactional justice.

*Procedural justice* is the perceived fairness of the means by which the ends are accomplished. The process is here more important than the outcome. Procedural justice aims at resolving conflicts in ways that encourage the continuation of a productive relationship between the disputants, even when outcomes are unsatisfactory to one or both parties (Folger, 1987; Tax, Brown & Chandrashekar, 1998).

Specifically and according to Tax, Brown & Chandrashekar (1998, p. 72), procedural justice reflect aspects of customer convenience and firm responsibility, follow-up and accessibility, with the adage «justice delayed is justice denied». Swiftness and accessibility, among other decisions, are important.

Finally, *interactional justice* refers to the fairness of the interpersonal treatment people received during the enactment of procedures. These interactional factors might help understand why some people feel to be unfairly treated even though they would characterize the decision making procedure and the outcome as fair.

This component takes into account the human part of the relationship and the quality of the communication between the firm and the complaining party. Research results point out several aspects of (un)fair communication and behavior, such as honesty, empathy and politeness (Tax, Brown & Chandrashekar, 1998).

**TABLE 1**  
**Types of justice and types of complaints**

Need for...

Type of justice	distributive	procedural	interactional
Usual complaints	important	less important	less important
«Friendly» complaints	less important	important	important

The economic aspect is a necessary condition for all complaints to be satisfied. In «friendly» complaints, the relational aspects will be prominent (Cf. Table 2).

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<sup>5</sup> Further research is needed in this field, but we might assume that human factors are more important for individual consumers. Industrial buying decision processes are supposed to be more rational.

**TABLE 2**  
**Types of justice, their prominent dimensions and types of relationship**

Type of relationship (contract)	Type of justice		
	distributive	procedural	interactional
Transactional	economic dimension	quickness of the response, accessibility	
Relational (*) (**)	emotional dimension	fairness of the process	all the aspects

(\*) All the dimensions present in the transactional type of contract are present in the relational one as well, but if they are necessary they are not discriminant.

(\*\*) « Friendly » complaints belong to this type of relationship.

### **2.3. Limits**

One of the most important limit of the strategy of developing complaints, even though they are «friendly», is that this policy may increase the customers' expectations. The more a firm responds well and quickly to complaints the more the consumer expects this firm to do so and the more it limits this type of strategy to its attributes with the strongest competitive advantages, otherwise customers may switch to competitors able to provide a better product/service. For this reason, it can be wise for firms to limit this policy to their best customers, who are supposed to be more loyal<sup>6</sup>.

Developing strong relationships with customers and giving them the feeling of being unique may represent a danger for the firm. The customer will increase his expectations according to the advantages he can get through this status.

If responses have to be quick (procedural justice), and delivered in a nice manner (interactional justice), they also have to be fair (distributive justice). Tax *et al.* (1998, p.62) give an interesting example that has occurred to Domino's Pizza: Their decision to change their service guarantee from «Delivery within 30 minutes or receive a free pizza » to « Delivery within 30 minutes or \$3.00 off the purchase price » was explained as an equity decision. Indeed the first response (a free pizza) was too generous; some customers were embarrassed by this policy.

It seems also clear that the «friendly» complaint developing strategy should be limited to markets where the competition is not too strong. We will see in a third part how the theory of justice can be useful in managing complaints and more specifically «friendly» complaints.

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## **3. WHICH STRATEGY TOWARD CONSUMER COMPLAINING BEHAVIORS**

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### **3.1. - Why sellers should encourage consumers to complain**

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<sup>6</sup> 'Loyalty' has to be taken here in a broader sense than Hirschman's definition, *i.e.* long-term customers.

Complaints may encourage the firm to improve its products/services so that customers as well as the firm itself benefit.

### **3.1.1. - Complaining behavior as a source of information about one's own firm and competitors**

Complaints are source of information about (1) one's company, (2) about competitors.

It may seem obvious that encouraging complaining is probably a good way to discover consumer problems and concerns. An analysis of complaints allow the seller to understand the buyer's perception of the company products and/or services. Firms can get useful information on product/service quality, delivery system weaknesses, etc.

A company may also gather information about competitors through the service guarantee system. Let us take the example of these firms which make the following promise: « we are the cheapest on the market », and that propose to refund the difference in price if the customer finds the same product cheaper anywhere else. Darty, a French household appliance distributor has built part of its success on this slogan. In this case, the seller is looking towards getting « complaints » from the customers. Indeed, coming back to say « I have found this product at a better price... » has the customer come back with information on the competitors. This constitutes part of the strategy of commercial intelligence.

### **3.1.2. - Complaints as a means of communication and loyalty building**

Beyond the information side, there are other advantages for the firm in encouraging customers to complain. Managing complaints can be (1) a means of communication and (2) of loyalty maintenance and building.

Complaints are a means of communication between the firm and its customers. According to Granovetter (1985), this communication helps building trust between the parties, which in turn helps the predictability of the other party's wills and actions. In this sense, it can be considered as a factor of stability in the relationship.

It can be assumed that the more the complaints are voiced to the firm, the less the customer will spread negative word-of-mouth complaints. Furthermore, the more the complaints are positively and quickly responded to, the more the customer is likely to spread positive word-of-mouth information.

Fornell and Wernerfelt (1987, p. 344) observe that «data available indicate that customer loyalty can be increased by encouraging customers to complain». Likewise, the emerging view in relationship marketing and service quality literature emphasizes «recovery» which is, dissatisfied consumers should be converted into satisfied customers (hence recovered) through quick and exemplary responsiveness by service providers (Lapidus & Pinkerton, 1995). In turn, this recovery rest on managers' understanding of the moment at which consumers complain, since recovery cannot occur without a complaint. Costs over a short-term period might be high but they should be recovered in the mid- and long-term with the increase of the loyalty rate and of the supplier's reputation.

## **3.2 - How the supplier can encourage consumer complaining behaviors**

It has been shown (Barksdale, Hargrove & Powell, 1984) that good handling of complaints is very constructive. The firm must communicate about its openness to receiving complaints. However, an optimum level of communication has to be found since too much emphasis on this might make the consumers suspicious about product/service quality and the firm's delivery capabilities.

The transactional and relational aspects both influence the complaining behavior. Some are controllable by the firm, some others are less controllable. There are several points of the transaction that the seller can hardly influence. For instance, Barksdale, Hargrove & Powell (1984) show that there is a link between the overall purchase price and the propensity to complain. They also demonstrate a negative link between the number of potential suppliers and the propensity to complain. These elements (the weight of a product price in the customer portfolio or the number of actors in the market) are not directly controlled by the seller. East (1998) reminds us that *predictive models* of complaining behaviors may include demographics, biographical and situational data as factors affecting complaining behaviors. The only tactic he can use is to communicate in such a way that the weight of these elements is decreased in the consumer's mind, but most of all the company has to know these factors and take them into account in its strategy.

There are other points which are easier to manipulate by the supplier who wants to increase the consumer propensity to complain. The consumer must have the feeling that complaining is worth the effort (Singh, 1990), that he will be listened to and understood. He should also be convinced that the incident was unfortunate and is not the general rule (especially when the customer attributes the origin of the problem to the supplier). The explanative models help defining a strategy. Indeed, *explanative models* focus on motivational factors and seem more useful to those whose aims are to change customers' behaviors through communication. Ajzen's theory (1991) of planned behaviors is very useful to identify and explore the antecedents of complaining behaviors. In this theory, three types of belief affect the probability of complaining behaviors by dissatisfied consumers:

- The *outcome beliefs* are about gains and losses, including opportunity costs, that follow complaining or not. These beliefs will be analyzed through the *customer's distributive justice* scheme.
- *Referent beliefs* are linked to the importance a customer can give to others' opinion. It is about what key people or groups think the customer should do.
- *Control beliefs* are linked to the *procedural justice*. They evaluate how easy or difficult it is for the customer to complain. These are knowledge, skills and other resources that can make complaining easier. Among the other resources are key points set by the customer's environment such as, for example, whether relevant personnel are accessible, etc. It is in some way linked to *interactional justice*.

In order to improve its customers' probability of complaining behavior when dissatisfaction occurs, a firm has to play on these three levers in its communication as well as in its complaint management. The customers should be clearly aware of the different means it can use to complain, where to go and how to complain. The French railway company, the S.N.C.F. has used the *control belief* lever (*procedural justice*)

during the winter 1996, when most of its trains were stopped by snow- and ice-storms. Agents were waiting in the train stations (*interactional justice*) and were giving to the high speed train (T.G.V.) passengers pre-stamped envelopes with the address of the customer service department in order to get reimbursed (*distributive justice*<sup>7</sup>). This action, even if it has been quite expensive for the company, has clearly helped it to recover and improve its image after this bad period.

This suggests that attempts to promote face-to-face, mail or other medium complaints should be designed to banish unease and make such behaviors a simple, common and acceptable part of the customers repertoire (East, 1998).

### **3.3. - The impact of relationship marketing on consumer complaining behaviors**

According to Day and Landon (1977), factors influencing the choice of alternative actions between exit, voice and loyalty (according to Hirschman's terminology) are:

- marketing aspects (seller's reputation, circumstances of the sale, responsiveness of the seller to complaints, etc.);
- consumer factors (e.g., propensity to complain);
- circumstantial factors.

As explained previously, it seems clear that the firm can mainly act on the first two categories of factors, *i.e.* the marketing aspects and consumers factors. Relational marketing has shown its capability to create strong links between service providers and customers<sup>8</sup>.

For this reason relationship marketing provides useful tools to «friendly» complaints.

Through the literature, one can identify four main characteristics of the relationship process (Perrien, Paradis & Bantig, 1995):

- it is an asymmetrical process guided by the supplier, *i.e.* the overall quality and effectiveness of any relationship rests on the seller. One of the objectives of a «friendly» complaints developing strategy is to balance this asymmetry ;
- it is a personalized process: buyer's knowledge is a basic requirement to the development of a relationship;
- it is a process with shared benefits: both the seller (supplier) and the buyer must obtain some tangible outcomes. Securing the desired quality of supply and ensuring customer loyalty are two of the most well known results expected from an effective relationship.
- and it is a process which requires a long-term commitment: basic objectives of a long-term relationship strategy are both to increase the customer's loyalty and to achieve some growth by cross-selling and developing relationships with high-margin customers;

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<sup>7</sup> Distributive justice was limited here to the economic aspect of the damage (equity). The emotional aspect (apologies) was quite neglected.

<sup>8</sup> Berry (1983) defines relationship marketing as «attracting, maintaining and -in multi-service organizations- enhancing customer relationship». He stresses in this definition that the attraction of new customers should be viewed only as an intermediate step in the marketing process.

It is useful to analyze how relationship marketing can help develop «friendly» complaints and why it works, that is the gains both parties in the exchange can get from this strategy.

Moreover the consequences for «friendly» complaints program can be on the communication side or on the relations perspective as shown in Table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**Relational characteristics and operational consequences for « friendly » complaints program**

<b>Prominent relational characteristics</b>	<b>Consequences for « friendly » complaints program</b>	
	<b>Communication side</b>	<b>Type of relations</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• asymmetrical process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– bidirectional communication</li> <li>– having any problem being reported</li> <li>– better understanding of customers</li> <li>– marketing intelligence (competitors)</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• personalized process</li> <li>• shared benefits</li> <li>• long-term commitment</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– building trust</li> <li>– good and quick responses (and relationship)</li> <li>– relational way to manage employees (employees/customers)</li> </ul>
<b>Means</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– emotional aspect (distributive justice)</li> <li>– fairness of the means (procedural aspect)</li> <li>– mainly interactional justice</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Relationship Marketing</b></p>	

The gray cells are not empty cells. They just represent the fact that the link is less strong between the asymmetrical process and the type of relation (and between the three other relational characteristics and the communication side). We have only focused on the dominant links.

### 3.3.1. - How to develop ‘friendly complaints’: through relational marketing?

The more the consumer blames the seller (attribution theory, *e.g.* Richins, 1983), or believes that the dissatisfaction could have been avoided, and that the dissatisfying event is likely to happen again, the stronger his reaction and his probability to complain. But in such circumstances, it will be difficult for a firm to repair the damages. Developing complaining behaviors in a less radical way would then be more interesting and efficient, which is the basis of «friendly» complaints. It would also decrease the asymmetry of the relationship.

« Friendly » complaints are direct and voiced actions to the supplier that aim to improve the product/service and the delivery process without threatening the relationship, and which ultimately help to strengthen the firm's competitive position.

To elicit such behavior the firm must:

- have a better understanding of its customers;
- develop bi-directional communication;
- build trust;
- give good and quick responses to complaints;
- develop a relational way to manage its employees<sup>9</sup>

All of these elements are strengthened by relationship marketing. Indeed, Grönroos (1994) defines the most important elements of relationship marketing as:

- *the promise concept*: a firm that is preoccupied with making promises may initially attract new customers and build relationships. However, if promises are not kept, the evolving relationship cannot be enhanced and maintained;
- *trust*: there has to be a belief in the other partner's trustworthiness which results from the expertise, reliability or intentionality of that partner (Moorman & al., 1993).

It implies a personalization of the relationship. Macneil (1980) also enhances the concepts of communication and flexibility in the relationship. Reichheld (1995) explains that there is no relationship marketing without any internal relationship management.

When a relationship is well established between a seller and its customer, the commitment of both parties is quite important. This long-term commitment can be a motor of action. In other words, the customer involved in the relationship will want to improve it and to help the supplier improving it as well.

### **3.3.2. - Why does it work: shared benefits of 'friendly complaints'**

Rationally, a strategy must be interesting for at least one party in order to survive on a long-term basis. Relational marketing goes further since it is supposed to bring benefits to all the parties involved. In the « friendly » complaint case, both parties perceive this relationship in its continuity. This means that the client wants to improve *via* complaints his/her future and the firm (the provider) wants to preserve its future revenues by retaining a satisfied customer. Both can reach their objectives by developing a system of « friendly » complaints.

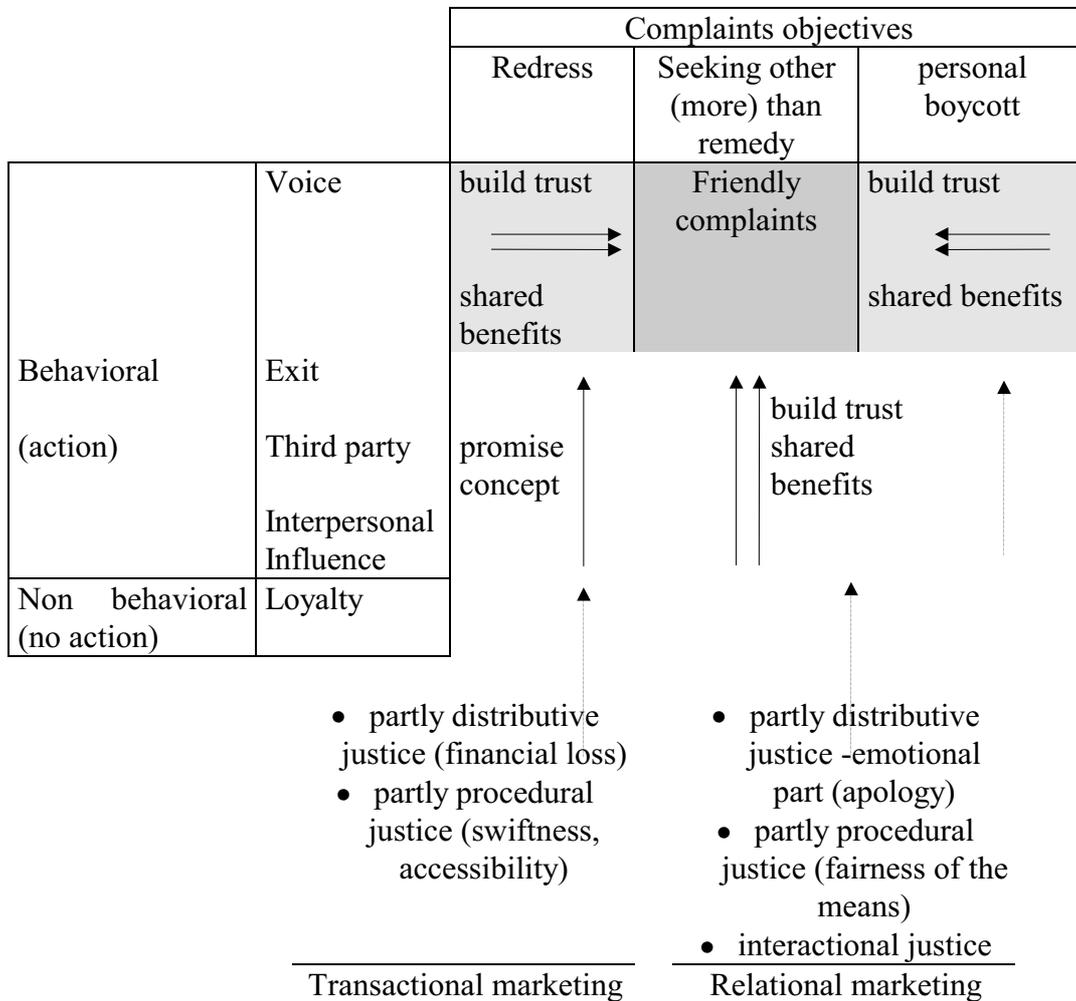
In the case of services, the intangible nature makes it difficult for customers to evaluate them prior to purchase. For this reason, it is very important to give the consumer the feeling that he can report any problem to the seller and that it is not his fault if something goes wrong. The major development of numerous free call numbers reflects this view. However, they are just a beginning since there is a need to develop the relationship on a much more personal level. There is also a great need to develop of a

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<sup>9</sup> Many firms have tried to develop relationship marketing. Some of them have failed because they have forgotten to develop the same 'philosophy' with their employees. They asked their employees to spend more time with their customers, to handle any incoming complaint carefully, etc. But the way these employees were managed and evaluated had remained the same (number of new customers, productivity, etc.) and were totally inadequate for the task (Reichheld, 1995).

relational way in managing employees. They need more independence and responsibilities in order to be able to answer and act quickly and efficiently to consumer requests.

**FIGURE 3**  
Possible scope of «friendly» complaints



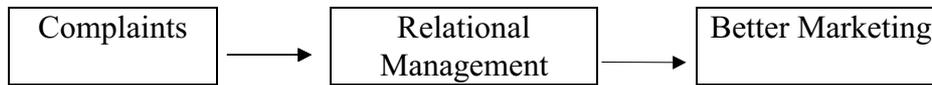
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## CONCLUSION

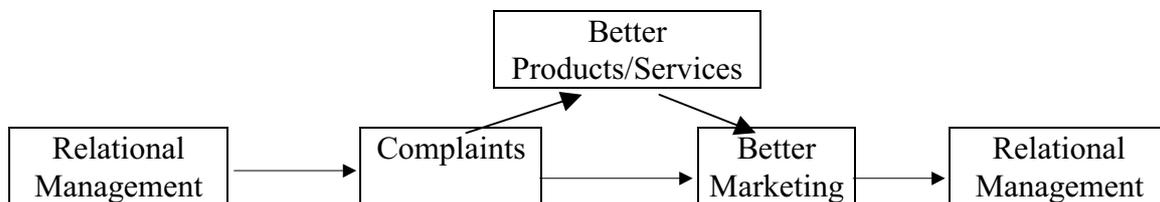
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The newness of the «friendly» complaint approach can be summarize as follow:

Traditionally the complaint treatment process was:



here it becomes:



It should be reminded that working on complaining behaviors must not become a substitute for product/service quality. Response strategies to consumer complaints must remain a last resource. But in competing economies, product/service quality has considerably improved, so customer service programs can be a key asset in the elaboration of the strategy of differentiation. That is why this issue is important. But developing «friendly» complaints cannot become a strategy by itself, that is THE strategy of the firm. It can only be an element of a broader program, including pro-active actions such as warranty programs. Moreover the strategy has to be focused on a limited number of attributes, attributes on which the firm has a competitive advantage for a limited number of customers, those who have a relational potential. Otherwise, a «friendly» complaints program can be very costly.

To summarize, complaints can be considered as positive if the company is able (1) to obtain all of the information contained in complaints, (2) act accordingly, that is quickly and positively, (3) make some consumers change their behavior that is going from an exit behavior or a no-complaint behavior or a personal complaint behavior to a voiced complaint -in a positive way-; (4) bring the consumer to seek something more than simple redress.

Actually, the development of appropriate policies and procedures is essential in reducing consumer complaints that damage the seller's reputation (Hansen & al., 1997). These damaging complaints are mainly negative word-of-mouth behavior since the firm cannot control them. Very often the firm doesn't even know their existence or discovers them when it is too late and when it has already been widely diffused common report.

Conducting investigation about «friendly» complaints and experiments strategy and behavior should be useful and necessary to test the propositions made in this article and

better understand complaining behaviors. Research would probably show that there exist different categories of consumers responding specifically to «friendly» complaints strategy, some of the customers being more sensitive to the transactional side of complaining, other to the relational or both to the relational or both the transactional and relational.

**TABLE 4**  
**« Friendly » Complaint Program**

		<b>Communication</b>	<b>Quality of response</b>	<b>Quality of relation</b>
<b>Customers</b>	All customers	Warranty, Information about competitors	Quick and specific response (transactional)	Good relationship response
	Loyal and best customers	Specific mailing	Good and positive response (specific attentions to these customers)	Specific follow-up program (good data warehouse)
<b>Attributes</b>	Most important attributes	Focusing on these attributes in terms of friendly complaints	Focusing on these attributes in term of quality of response	Training of employees in terms of relationship marketing
	Other attributes	No specific communication on these attributes and good transactional complaint program		

It is likely also to find differences between Business-to-Business and Business-to-Consumers situations. A first analysis could make researchers think that emotional factors will be less important in the first context. Nevertheless this could be misleading since the relational part is prominent in a Business-to-Business context and further research is needed to clearly formalized the differences between retail customers and industrial customers.

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