



## Anticipating a service experience

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the anticipations consumers have before service experiences. Consumers think ahead about future service experiences and may foresee problems or discomfort. This research examines the strategies consumers engage in to minimize the impact of these anticipated problems or discomforts. Qualitative interviews and the critical incident technique with a content analysis provide the tools of this study. In Study 1, planning and preparation, avoidance and adjustment, and seeking support emerge as three problem-solving behaviors. In Study 2, the same three problem-solving behaviors emerge, while a fourth category, gathering information, also appears. In addition, worry, as an emotional response to perceived risk, provides understanding to service anticipation issues. Social risk plays a particularly important role as well.

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## 1. Background

### 1.1. Introduction

In the academic business literature, plentiful research exists on the ways in which consumers plan ahead for major life events, such as retirement or sending children to college. What is missing from the existing literature is the idea that consumers also plan for everyday events, such as shopping trips, salon visits, and restaurant meals. Consumers engage in future-oriented planning, which includes developing problem-solving strategies for anticipated problems or discomforts. In marketing, no research exists that focuses specifically on the anticipations consumers plan for or the problem-solving strategies they use in anticipation of upcoming consumer events. However, several literatures speak to these topics: coping and anticipatory coping, perceived risk, and problem-solving strategies.

### 1.2. Coping

Generally, the term coping describes how a person handles a problem. Traditional coping research focuses on the thought processes and behaviors that an individual uses following a taxing or stressful appraisal of an event (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004). An individual initiates the coping process in response to an appraisal that important goals are threatened or are in harm's way. The individual's appraisal,

or interpretation of the situation (rather than the actual event), determines the emotions that will be felt (Roseman, 1984). Emotions cannot occur without thoughts about the situation (cognition) (Lazarus, 1991). Psychology and marketing researchers often divide coping into two categories: problem-focused (attempting to manipulate the environment to reduce stress) or emotion-focused (reappraising the environment) (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Recently, however, many authors are moving away from using these two categories to explain coping behavior (i.e., Duhachek, 2005; Yi and Baumgartner, 2004) because the two distinctions are complementary and difficult to separate (Duhachek, 2005; Lazarus, 1996). In marketing, traditional coping is receiving considerable attention, but the research is limited to coping after a problem or stressful event occurs. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) call for additional research to determine how people reduce the negative impact of events that might occur in the future.

### 1.3. Anticipatory coping

Psychology expands coping research to include a concept called anticipatory coping, which describes the problem-solving prior to an appraisal of a problematic event occurring (Campos, 2003; Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004). Anticipatory coping involves getting ready for stressful consequences of an upcoming event that is likely or certain (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997), and can minimize the impact of the event by helping the individual manage risks and maximize coping efforts (Schwarzer and Knoll, 2003). Anticipatory coping can be both cognitive and behavioral (Feldman and Hayes, 2005). Many events are predictable, and therefore, individuals are able to anticipate what may happen (Feldman and Hayes, 2005). People can, in advance, improve

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the effects of aversive events, and this finding is reflected in clinical practice (Newby-Clark, 2004).

#### 1.4. Perceived risk

Related to the concept of anticipatory coping is perceived risk. Perceived risk is an individual's judgment of the likelihood that a loss could occur and the seriousness of the consequences of that loss (Yeung and Morris, 2006). Consumers take actions to avoid or reduce risk. Risk-reduction strategies aim to lessen uncertainty, but also may reduce the consequences that could arise. Very little research is available in the marketing literature on the specific emotions that perceived risk evokes. However, Chaudhuri (1997) finds that negative emotions are responsible for a substantial portion of variance in perceived risk. In the social psychology literature, Bergstrom and McCaul (2004) find that worry and dread (classified in their paper as anticipatory emotions) are strong predictors of behavior when individuals make decisions involving risk.

#### 1.5. Problem-solving strategies

Solving a problem involves creating a new idea or combining existing ideas in response to a specific situation (Burroughs and Mick, 2004). When an individual has a problem, he/she must be motivated, through some discomfort or disequilibrium, to solve the problem (Davis, 1973). Individuals may have multiple service experiences each day, and therefore must decide which anticipations or perceived problems to devote energy to and which to postpone for later consideration, if considered at all (Meacham and Emont, 1989). Individuals often rely on a limited number of heuristic principles to reduce the complex tasks of assessing all situations. For example, the findings of Yeung and Soman (2007) suggest that duration of the service is a highly accessible cue that consumers typically use in service evaluations. Service providers may be concerned about the heuristics associated with their specific service.

#### 1.6. Research objectives

Previous literature helps in understanding the primary issue of interest—consumers' anticipations and reactions before service experiences. Marketing needs a better understanding of what consumers are thinking and doing in anticipation of upcoming service experiences. The purpose of this paper is to examine this issue using depth interviews and the critical incident technique with a content analysis. Three main research questions are of interest here:

- What are consumers' anticipations/perceptions of risk before service experiences?
- What do consumers do about their anticipations before a service experience? What are the problem-solving behaviors/coping strategies that consumers use?
- What are the predominant emotions that result from these anticipations?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Design and procedure

This research uses a two-pronged approach to explore these research questions: a qualitative, in-depth interview phase and a critical incident study with a content analysis phase (cf. Holloway and Beatty, 2003). Study 1 includes seventeen in-depth interviews. These individuals discussed service experiences in which they anticipate some type of problem or a potentially uncomfortable situation and addressed what they do (if anything) about these anticipatory concerns before a service experience. The responses indicate that the informants engage in similar

problem-solving behaviors for various anticipated service experiences. These interviews lay the foundation for the second phase. Study 2 captures a wider range of service experiences in order to validate and extend the classification scheme of problem-solving strategies developed in Study 1, as well as examining the emotions and risk perceptions involved. In the second study, 111 respondents wrote about service experiences in which they think ahead about the service (i.e., anticipated risk) and either anticipate a problem or foresee an uncomfortable situation. They describe how these anticipations make them feel (i.e., anticipatory emotions), and what, if anything, they might do in response to these thoughts, concerns, or potential risks (i.e., problem-solving strategies).

## 3. Study 1

### 3.1. Data collection

In Study 1, using in-depth interviews, the authors explore the concerns consumers have prior to or in anticipation of a service experience. The study aims to uncover the consumer's pre-service thoughts and behaviors. The in-depth interview method is appropriate when seeking to understand a phenomenon that has yet to be extensively explored (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The seventeen informants were located using a convenience sampling approach. Friends, family members, and acquaintances participated in a 30-minute semi-structured interview. Informants saw a list of 37 service providers first, and then they were asked to think about a service provider they go to (or one that comes to them) in which they might think ahead of time about and/or contemplate the experience. Finally, the informants addressed what they might feel or do in preparation for the experience. Interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Table 1 provides a profile of the informants. Ten are under 40 years of age and seven are over 40, with 65% females and 82% Caucasians.

### 3.2. Data analysis

The researchers used an iterative reading technique to analyze the interview transcripts regarding the strategies or behaviors individuals engage in prior to a service experience. Based on guidelines by Strauss and Corbin (1998), the researchers used open-coding methods to identify concepts with common properties and dimensions. The researchers clustered strategies pertaining to the same category

**Table 1**

Study 1: in-depth interview respondents.

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital status	Occupation
1. Evelyn	75	Female	Caucasian	Widowed	Retired
2. Linda	52	Female	Caucasian	Single	Accountant
3. Aileen	51	Female	Caucasian	Single	Not employed
4. Andy	49	Male	Caucasian	Married	Minister
5. Susan	48	Female	Caucasian	Married	Seasonal Tax Accountant
6. Barry	41	Male	Caucasian	Married	Small business owner
7. Rhonda	40	Female	Caucasian	Married	Campus ministries
8. Adam	31	Male	American Indian	Married	Physical therapist
9. Kathy	27	Female	Caucasian	Engaged	Teacher
10. Jack	27	Male	Asian-American	Single	Graduate student
11. Jenny	26	Female	Caucasian	Married	Nurse
12. Amy	25	Female	Hispanic	Married	Graduate student
13. Bo	25	Male	Caucasian	Engaged	Graduate student
14. Shelly	25	Female	Caucasian	Single	Teacher
15. Daniel	23	Male	Caucasian	Single	Construction worker
16. Jalan	23	Female	Caucasian	Single	Real estate appraiser
17. Kelly	21	Female	Caucasian	Single	Student

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