



Merely asking the customer to recommend has an impact on word-of-mouth activity



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines if a mere request to a customer – within the frame of a service encounter – to engage in word-of-mouth (WOM) would have an impact on the customer's subsequent WOM activity. Although previous studies have not examined this issue, theoretical arguments do exist. And they point in different directions; some suggest a positive impact, while others suggest a negative impact. To explore the issue empirically, we carried out two studies (one survey-based study and one experiment). Both generated the same result: they indicate that merely asking customers to engage in WOM has a positive impact on customers' WOM activity. In addition, we found that receiving the request was not negatively associated with the customers' overall evaluations, such as customer satisfaction, which indicates that the potential for negative consequences of making the request seems to be low.

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1. Introduction

Both researchers and practitioners believe that word-of-mouth (WOM) is producing benefits for the firm. Typically, it is assumed that the receiver would find WOM particularly important and subject to less resistance than marketer-generated messages (Cheung et al., 2007; Mangold et al., 1999; Meuter et al., 2013; Schellekens et al., 2010; Sweeney et al., 2014; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2007; Trusov et al., 2009; Wien and Olsen, 2014). Therefore, WOM transmission, it is argued, is positively associated with sales growth (Reichheld, 2003). WOM is also assumed to reduce the firm's marketing expenses when existing customers who transmit WOM take on a marketing role, and thus several authors have argued that WOM is linked to the firm's profitability (e.g., Kumar et al., 2007). In addition, it has been noted that WOM is increasingly important in a situation in which communication through traditional media appears to be losing effectiveness (Sweeney et al., 2012; Trusov et al., 2009) and when social media has made WOM more rapid and pervasive (Wien and Olsen, 2014).

Given positive consequences of WOM, the antecedents of WOM become interesting – particularly if they can be influenced by firms' activities. Several antecedents have received attention over the years. An early attempt to suggest specific activities to encourage the customer to transmit WOM is represented by Dichter

(1966). The focus in subsequent research, however, has shifted towards general evaluation variables, which have been shown to be positively associated with WOM. Examples are customer satisfaction (Anderson, 1998; Ranaweera and Prabhu, 2003; Sweeney et al., 2012; Westbrook, 1987), perceived service quality (Danaheer and Rust, 1996; Hartline and Jones, 1996), and perceived value (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001; Sweeney et al., 2012). Antecedents in terms of trust (Gremler et al., 2001), perceived novelty (Bone, 1992), affective commitment (Fullerton, 2005), and relationship commitment (Brown et al., 2005) have also been examined. In addition, individual characteristics, such as the sender's individualism (Wien and Olsen, 2014) and the sender's need to impress others, to help others, and to reduce cognitive dissonance (cf. Blackwell et al., 2001; Gelb and Johnson, 1995) have been examined as possible antecedents of WOM. Antecedents of these types may indeed be useful to boost WOM if they are parts of a larger conceptual network of (controllable) variables. For example, given a theory that states that the specific activity X produces more satisfaction, firms may decide to increase the frequency of X to increase satisfaction and thus obtain more WOM as an end product.

Direct influence attempts are also possible for marketers interested in boosting WOM activity, particularly in terms of so-called referral reward programs (a.k.a. “recommend-a-friend-programs”). Such programs have indeed become ubiquitous (Ryu and Feick, 2007; Verlegh et al., 2013; Xiao et al., 2011). Empirical research shows that they may encourage existing customers to provide WOM to friends, particularly when the customer is highly

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satisfied (Wirtz and Chew, 2002), when the recommended brand is weak, and when the transmitter-receiver relation represents a weak personal tie (Ryu and Feick, 2007). Such findings have also generated research regarding the design of referral reward programs in terms of, for example, if the transmitter, the receiver, or both of them should receive rewards. However, rewarding customers for WOM may backfire. In general, if the transmitter is viewed as a communicator – and if this communicator is seen as motivated by commercial interests – the message is likely to be met with resistance (Friestad and Wright, 1994). Thus, and in the specific case of WOM communication, if receivers of WOM become aware of the reward aspect, the trustworthiness aspect of WOM may be compromised (Tuk et al., 2009). That is to say, the effectiveness of WOM is likely to be reduced if the receiver believes that ulterior motives are involved (Verlegh et al., 2013). In addition, the reward aspect may also have a negative impact on the transmitter; if the transmitter feels that s/he has “sold” his/her recommendation, this may produce negative self-image reactions (Ryu and Feick, 2007).

What, then, if there is a simpler and more cost-efficient way to encourage WOM than referral rewards? The most straightforward way would be to ask the customer to engage in WOM. That is to say, merely requesting the customer to recommend an offer, without any reward system in place, costs very little. Yet would this work? Research in a related area, cross-selling attempts, suggests that it may work, because simply asking the customer (who has already decided to purchase an item) if s/he also would consider buying an additional item has been shown to be a very cost-efficient practice to influence customer behavior and thus to increase sales (Söderlund, 2013). At the same time, a WOM request may be seen as an irritating and annoying tactic in the same way as intrusive advertising (cf. Edwards et al., 2002). However, so far, and to the best of our knowledge, the mere request approach has not been assessed in a WOM context.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore empirically if merely requesting the customer – within the frame of conversations in a service encounter – to recommend an offer would influence the customer's WOM activities. Two separate empirical studies were conducted to explore the issue.

2. Theoretical framework

The specific issue we focus on here is thus if merely requesting a customer to engage in WOM transmission would have an impact on the customer's subsequent WOM activities. Some theoretical arguments suggest a positive impact, yet arguments implying a negative impact exist, too. Such arguments are reviewed in the following sections.

2.1. Question-behavior effect studies

Several studies have shown that merely asking a question about behavior can influence subsequent behavior related to the question (Chandon et al., 2005; Sprott et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2006). One general label for this phenomenon is “the question-behavior effect” (Sprott et al., 2006). Most of the research in this area has dealt with questionnaire items, particularly intentions questions (e.g., “How likely is it that you will do X?”) and self-prediction questions (e.g., “Do you predict that you will do X?”), and several studies show that respondents' exposure to such items makes behavior related to the questions more likely to be carried out (Chandon et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2006).

With regard to intention questions, one explanation is that when asked about intentions, pre-existing intentions become more accessible in memory (and non-existing intentions may be

formed), and this leads to increased strength in respondents' intentions compared to when no intention question is asked (Chandon et al., 2005). In the next step, and given the influence of intentions on behavior, behavior is expected to be affected. Alternatively, the mere asking about intentions may signal that someone cares about the respondent's views, which has a positive charge that may carry over to attitudes related to performing the behavior (ibid.). In both cases, actually performing the behavior would lead to a higher level of intention-behavior consistency (and a high level of consistency is assumed to be particularly desirable, cf. Cialdini, 1987). Other researchers have stressed the possibility that an intention question may increase accessibility to existing attitudes toward a target, and given that those attitudes are positive it is likely that behavior towards the target follows (Sprott et al., 2006). It may be noted that empirical support for this has been shown not only in the case of socially accepted behaviors, but also for activities such as drug use (Williams et al., 2006).

As for the ability of self-prediction questions to affect subsequent behavior (particularly when it comes to socially approved behavior), it has been argued that dissonance mechanisms are likely to be involved; the prediction request is assumed to make individuals aware of what they should do as well as what they have done (or not done) in the past. If these cognitions are discrepant, dissonance occurs. In the next step, in order to reduce dissonance, individuals perform the behavior subject to the self-prediction request (Spangenberg et al., 2003).

Here, however, we are not concerned with the link between questionnaire items and behavior; we are concerned with explicitly requesting a customer – in a face-to-face situation – to engage in WOM. Nevertheless, we believe that similar mechanisms as discussed in the question-behavior effect literature may operate. That is to say, a WOM request is likely to make WOM intentions more accessible (and the request may contribute to forming such intentions in the case in which they initially are non-existing). Given, then, that the request indeed makes intentions more accessible, we would expect a consistency mechanism to contribute to the actual performing of WOM activity. As an alternative and more affective route, there are several potential benefits for a customer to engage in WOM transmission; it may reduce post-purchase dissonance, it may serve to impress others, and it may be a way of helping others making better choices (cf. Ryu and Feick, 2007). Given that many customers are likely to be aware of these aspects, and of their positive affective charge, it is possible that a WOM request increases accessibility to positive memories of previous WOM activities and thus that positive affect associated with prior WOM activity makes it increasingly likely to happen again. It is also possible that engaging in WOM per se represents a positive norm, and thus that an already positive attitude towards WOM would become more accessible – and more causally potent in relation to WOM activity – given a WOM request (cf. Williams et al., 2006). These arguments, then, suggest that receiving a request to engage in WOM would have a positive impact on subsequent WOM activity.

2.2. Signaling effects

Marketing activities, particularly advertising, can be seen as signaling various unobservable characteristics of an offer – such as the firm's confidence in and commitment to its offer – which the receiver can use as clues regarding the offer's quality (Kirmani, 1997; Kirmani and Rao, 2000). We assume that an employee's explicit request for WOM can work in the same way; it may signal that the employee is committed to having additional customers to test the offer and therefore that s/he is highly confident regarding the quality of the offer. Given that the WOM request is viewed as a signal, it may affect the customer's WOM activity in two ways.

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