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Consumer social voice in the age of social media: Segmentation profiles and relationship marketing strategies

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Abstract Service failures, once handled quietly by customer service departments, are now played out on a highly public social media stage. These failures can result in not only the loss of a loyal consumer but also can negatively affect relationships with those watching the dialogue between disgruntled customers and organizations. The phenomenon of seeking resolution to service failures online is distinct from both traditional word-of-mouth and voice behaviors. This article introduces *social voice*: public complaining behavior that aims to change the behavior of the organization. A qualitative methodology defines eight dimensions of social voice and categorizes them by the strength of the relationship to the organization. Results indicate that appropriate response strategies differ based on social voice segment.
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1. The rise of social media as an outlet for unhappy customers

Marketers have fully embraced social media, with over 96% of businesses using social media as a marketing tool and 92% saying social media is important to their business goals (Stelzner, 2015). Heralded as a new paradigm in marketing, social media stands to give consumers a powerful and undeniable voice in their relationships with organizations. Marketing communication is now evolving toward two-way conversations rather than one-way, mass-media sermons. However, influential and frequently negative consumer comments on social media have left many companies unsure of how to address public criticism; marketers cite negative consumer response on their social media sites as their number one fear (Gillin, 2009). Many companies have experienced the sting of widespread negative social media backlash from consumers, resulting in bad press, falling stock prices, forced

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reversals on social issues and, in some extreme cases, in businesses closing their doors altogether (Grégoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2015; Kim, Wang, Maslowska, & Malthouse, 2016).

Consumers have quickly embraced social media as an outlet for complaints. A growing percentage of consumers would rather contact a company to complain via social media as opposed to in-person or on the telephone (Gesenhues, 2013), yet 64% of consumers report that their customer service inquiries were not resolved via social media. When consumer issues are not addressed on social media in a timely manner, 38% of respondents will have more negative attitudes toward a brand and 60% are more likely to take a negative action toward the brand in terms of negative word-of-mouth, escalating complaints through other avenues, and buying less from the company or switching altogether (Gesenhues, 2013). Seventy-two percent of consumers expect brands to respond to complaints on Twitter within an hour. The benefits of meeting consumer expectations when responding to social media complaints are obvious; timely and satisfactory responses to complaints resulted in 47% of consumers more likely to recommend the brand through social media and increased purchase intentions for 34% of consumers (Gesenhues, 2013). Other studies indicate that consumers will spend 21% more if they receive good customer service through social media sites (Bennett, 2012).

With 2.4 billion conversations about brands taking place every day in online media, it is clear that marketers must understand and have strategies in place to handle consumer voice in order to preserve and nurture consumer relationships. Furthermore, marketers must be prepared to identify and execute appropriate responses to consumer complaints very quickly in order to meet minimal customer expectations for service on social media. However, there is little research in the field of social media that addresses how managers should handle social consumer voice in a manner that benefits the organization. This study seeks to identify and categorize the different types of complaints on social media. Our in-depth, qualitative analysis using a netnographic method (Kozinets, 2010) allowed us to produce a typology of public complaint behavior on social media sites; we introduce eight types or segments of social media voice (or complaint) with illustrative quotes. This approach rejects a one-size-fits-all recovery strategy and instead focuses on the best way to recover the consumer relationship and minimize damage from negative word-of-mouth as a starting point for effective (and public) service recovery strategies.

2. The evolution of consumer complaint behavior

2.1. Service failures and voice

Hirschman's (1970) exit, voice, and loyalty framework explores consumer reaction to the survey failure. *Exit* suggests that consumers may leave the organization or switch to another organization. *Loyalty* suggests that a consumer holds strong enough ties to an organization to resist exiting after a failure; rather, a loyal consumer may either remain silent and continue patronage or be more likely to use voice. *Voice* is when a consumer expresses his/her dissatisfaction with a business interaction to a representative of the organization in the hopes of arriving at a satisfactory solution that prevents exit from the organization (Hirschman, 1970). Voice is considered an active and constructive complaint behavior, which attempts to salvage the business relationship by suggesting means in which a dissatisfactory experience can be made satisfactory to the aggrieved party (Vidal, Fenneteau, & Paché, 2016). Historically, voice takes place in a private forum (speaking to someone with the authority to address your issue such as a manager). However, a growing number of consumers now say social media is their first and most preferred touch point for interacting with organizations (Grant, 2013).

2.2. Negative word-of-mouth

While voice is typically a complaint response directed toward the offending organization, negative word-of-mouth has typically been a complaint response about the offending organization directed to other individuals outside the organization. Traditionally, word-of-mouth took place between the individual and a few receivers. However, online forums, review sites, and, more recently, social media sites result in the ability of negative word-of-mouth to reach large networks of individuals connected via online technology. Electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) differs from traditional word-of-mouth in that it is usually expressed in writing, is presented in public forums, and can be stored and searched electronically (Andreassen & Streukens, 2009). The extent of the phenomenon is far-reaching. In the U.S. alone, 65% of adults use social media sites (Cohen, 2015) and half of those people have submitted product reviews or rated products on social networking sites (Balaji, Khong, & Chong, 2016). Baldacci (2013) reported that 80% of reviews posted on social networking platforms are negative or critical. The negative E-WOM has led to negative effects concerning other consumers, including