



## Facilitating customer adherence to complex services through multi-interface interactions: The case of a weight loss service



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### ABSTRACT

Today's communication landscape affords multiple service interfaces to promote customer engagement (i.e. adherence) with complex and prolonged services, but an understanding of how customers use them is limited. This study compares personal and non-personal interfaces that provide educational and/or emotional support for customers to develop the operant resources (i.e. competence and motivation) necessary for adherence. A survey of 270 subscribers to a weight-loss programme demonstrates that booklets and a website (non-personal interfaces) provide educational support that enhances role clarity and ability to adhere, respectively. For novices, it is customer forums (personal interface) that afford the educational support needed to develop ability. Group meetings (personal interface) provide emotional support that boosts customer motivation to adhere and, in turn, encourages them to help other customers. Our study distinguishes types of support for adherence, accessed via multiple service interfaces, has implications for management and highlights needs for future research into complex and prolonged services.

### 1. Introduction

Complex and prolonged services, such as healthcare, weight-loss, education and sports services, require highly engaged customers who participate in co-producing the service to reap the desired benefits (Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert, & Zeithaml, 1997). These are services for which customers contribute a considerable range of resources (cognitive, emotional and physical inputs) within their own sphere to co-produce the service, often over prolonged periods of time, by adhering to guidelines set out by the service provider (see also Bitner et al., 1997; Spanjol et al., 2015; Sweeney, Danaher, & McColl-Kennedy, 2015). Firms are motivated to support adherence as it leads to customer goal attainment, satisfaction (Dellande, Gilly, & Graham, 2004) and positive word of mouth (Verleye, Gemmel, & Rangarajan, 2014). The modern communications landscape offers firms a multitude of ways to interact with and support customers (Patrício, Fisk, Falcão e Cunha, & Constantine, 2011). Further, interactions amongst customers providing help and support to one another are increasingly facilitated through firm-hosted on-line forums (Dholakia, Blazevic, Wiertz, & Algesheimer, 2009), adding to the range of interfaces customers can draw upon to develop the resources necessary for co-production activities. However, there is a lack of insight on how customers seek support in multi-interface environments and, consequently, little guidance for service

providers on ways to combine interfaces to support their customers (Neslin et al., 2006). The purpose of this paper is to explore how multiple service interfaces, and the forms of support they provide, help customers to develop the operant resources (i.e. competencies and motivation) necessary for adherence.

The research is carried out in the context of a weight-loss programme, which is recognised to be a complex and prolonged service (Nyer & Dellande, 2010; Spanjol et al., 2015) because it requires a considerable co-production effort from customers, involving the development of competencies and sustained levels of motivation over some time. Our research focuses upon customer perceptions of educational and emotional support provided by the firm and other customers (i.e. multiple actors) through various service interfaces, examining the effect on aspects of competence and motivation that enable adherence and promote helping other customers.

Customer activities in line with firm guidelines are sometimes labelled as compliance (Dellande et al., 2004). However, we adopt the term customer adherence, which reflects the notion that service customer behaviour is active and voluntary (Meichenbaum & Turk, 1987). Adherence acknowledges that guidelines can be contextualised to fit with a customer's personal preferences and circumstances, which is more aligned with the S-D logic perspective of the customer as an agentic actor (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). This study aligns conceptually

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with the S-D logic perspective, which views customers as integrators of operant resources (defined as those that are capable of acting on other resources to provide benefit) and operand resources (resources that require action upon them to be useful to co-create value) (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). It acknowledges that customers' value creating activities can take place outside the sphere of the service organisation (Grönroos, 2011) and depend on their own context, practices, resources and experiences (Heinonen, Strandvik, & Voima, 2013). While we recognise that operand resources are essential for resource integration, our focus will be on the interfaces that support customers to develop operant resources – competencies and motivation – that are seen as essential to improve adherence (e.g. Spanjol et al., 2015). As detailed later, for the purpose of this study, we define customer adherence as '*customers' co-production activities that apply service guidelines, within the parameters for personalization, to progress toward desired service benefits*'.

Traditionally, instructions from providers, viewed as embodied service provider expertise, were regarded as the most powerful cue for adherence (Bowman, Heilman, & Seetharaman, 2004; Dellande et al., 2004) and attention has centred upon customer education as a way to enable customers to perform ascribed roles and tasks. Although this work has provided valuable insights into the features of customer education (relating to content, channel, timing and source) that influence its effectiveness (Temerak, Winklhofer, & Hibbert, 2010), most studies have examined only a single service interface, such as face-to-face consultations, leaflets or websites (Auh, Bell, McLeod, & Shih, 2007; Bowman et al., 2004; Dellande et al., 2004; Lin & Hsieh, 2011; Zaho, Mattila, & Tao, 2008) and have focused on firm-customer dyads. This reflects a narrow view on service when it is increasingly recognised that developing operant resources can take place through multiple actors, accessible through various interfaces within service networks (Breidbach, Brodie, & Hollebeek, 2014).

While consumer education positively influences adherence (Dellande et al., 2004), there is growing evidence that support is also required to assist people to implement the regimen, and then stick with it. Support from actors including professionals, family members and peers plays an important role in helping people to adapt regimens to their personal circumstances and motivate behaviour over time (DiMatteo, 2004; Zolnieriek & DiMatteo, 2009). To enable customer adherence requires attention to the ways educational input and emotional support can be provided, yet there is a lack of empirical research that offers insight into how individuals draw upon these different forms of support, which interfaces they prefer (i.e. non-personal versus personal) and how these interfaces help customers develop the necessary operant resources (i.e. competencies and motivation) necessary for adherence. There is also a lack of understanding whether consumers reciprocate help obtained from the customer community in the context of complex services. The latter is necessary to ensure the survival of such personal forms of support.

To advance our understanding of how service providers can support customers in developing the operant resources necessary for adhering to complex and prolonged services, this paper draws from literature on education and social support to illuminate differences in the types of support provided by personal and non-personal interfaces. Further, it provides empirical insights into the reciprocity generated when customers make use of personal interfaces. Through this inquiry, we hone in on two aspects of customer engagement – adherence and customer helping behaviour (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verleye et al., 2014) – and offer insights on how to manage these types of customer engagement behaviour via personal and non-personal service interfaces in the context of complex and prolonged services.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses development

### 2.1. Customer co-production and adherence

Scholars have long recognised the importance of enabling customers

to perform “in-role” behaviours (e.g. Bettencourt & Brown, 1997) defined as “behaviors necessary for successful service creation” (Yi, Natarajan, & Gong, 2011:88). In complex service contexts, these tend to be conceived as a form of co-production given the importance of service provider expertise in shaping recommended activities (Mende & van Doorn, 2015). Early research was dominated by a managerial perspective and focused upon customers' willingness and ability to enact the roles ascribed to them (Kelley, Skinner, & Donnelly, 1992; Lengnick-Hall, 1996). However, in the last fifteen years this literature (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003; Dellande et al., 2004; Guo, Arnould, Gruen, & Tang, 2013; Meuter, Bitner, Ostrom, & Brown, 2005) has aligned with the idea that value is co-created (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), acknowledging the idiosyncratic nature of value, the contextualized nature of customers' behaviour and the importance of mutual service relationships.

The terms compliance (Dellande et al., 2004; Gallan, Jarvis, Brown, & Bitner, 2013) and adherence (Spanjol et al., 2015) are applied to describe the extent to which people enact in-role behaviours to co-produce complex services; also viewed as forms of customer engagement (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Although these two constructs have distinct conceptualisations, they are often used interchangeably (Black & Gallan, 2015). Compliance reflects the extent to which a customer conforms to a service provider's requests, policies, or procedures (Guo et al., 2013) and has been criticised on the grounds that it neglects the potential agency of customers (Bastable, 2006). Consequently, some recent research (Seiders, Flynn, Berry, & Haws, 2014; Snell, White, & Dagger, 2014; Spanjol et al., 2015) has elected to focus upon adherence, most notably for research into well-being, which interfaces with literature in the field of health.

The concept of adherence is applied in healthcare because it is compatible with models of patient-centred care, which represents a move away from obliging patients to acquiesce to the instructions of healthcare professionals (Lutfey & Wishner, 1999). It reflects the complexity of healthcare, attributes a greater degree of agency to patients and acknowledges the social and personal (psychological, behavioural, personality) barriers that were shown to influence non-compliance (Lutfey & Wishner, 1999). It is defined as “active, voluntary, and collaborative involvement of the patient in a mutually acceptable course of behaviour to produce a therapeutic result” (Meichenbaum & Turk, 1987: 20). The rationale for adopting adherence in service research centres upon the argument that complex services are co-produced and, although organisations provide guidelines, customers derive value by adapting the service to their own preferences and circumstances. It is through adherence, then, rather than compliance, that they are able to realize value within their own personal contexts (Spanjol et al., 2015). However, the definition of adherence that has emerged from the healthcare literature and is applied to service research assumes a high level of personal service from a professional. In contrast, customers of service organisations that adopt mass market models may not explicitly “agree” a course of action; rather, activities conducive to deriving service benefits are shaped through contextualising service guidelines. Therefore for the purpose of our research we define customer adherence as '*customers' co-production activities that apply service guidelines, within the parameters for personalization, to progress toward desired service benefits*'. This definition reflects the context of our study and aligns with contemporary conceptualizations of co-production that acknowledge the personalised nature of service benefits and customer agency in contextualisation processes.

### 2.2. Developing customer operant resources to facilitate adherence

Customers need a variety of operant (e.g., time, knowledge, skill, emotional resilience) and operand resources (money, transport, facilities, equipment) for service co-production (Ettgar, 2008). In this study we focus upon ways to facilitate adherence by developing customers' operant resources, specifically, their competencies and motivation to start and persist with adherence activities that they adjust to their

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