



Marketer requests for positive post-purchase satisfaction evaluations: Consumer depth interview findings[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The somewhat common practice of marketers asking customers for a positive post-purchase satisfaction evaluation has received very little attention in the marketing, retailing, and services literature. This qualitative study investigates consumer responses to requests for positive post-purchase evaluations using real-life experiences from consumers' actual buying stories. Depth interviews were conducted with 11 consumers who shared 14 buying stories in which each had recently been asked to provide a positive post-purchase evaluation. Interpretation of the buying stories resulted in six themes. Each of the themes is discussed with illustrative excerpts. Finally, the implications of the findings for marketers requesting positive post-purchase evaluations are discussed along with the broader concerns highlighted by the findings relative to consumer distrust of marketers in general.

1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction continues to be a central concept and priority for most companies (Morgan et al., 2005; Szymanski and Henard, 2001; Oliver, 2010), and firms are increasingly measuring customer satisfaction and other post-purchase evaluations (Grimes, 2012; Denove and Power IV, 2006). A survey of 813 companies found that 86% gather some type of feedback from their customers (MarketTools, 2010). Frontline employees often play a critical role in delivering customer satisfaction (Homburg et al., 2009), and they are frequently evaluated based on the results of post-purchase evaluation surveys (Denove and Power IV, 2006; Healey, 2012; Jones, 2014). Frontline employees may be fired, reprimanded, promoted, or given bonuses based on the survey evaluations customers provide. A somewhat common practice has emerged in which frontline employees specifically ask customers for a positive rating (Jones et al., 2014; Denove and Power IV, 2006; Reichheld, 2003). This practice has been referred to as a 'request for positive evaluation' in the marketing literature (Jones et al., 2014) and 'survey begging' by author and consultant Toister (2017). A report by *Consumer Reports* indicated that 32% of new car buyers were asked by the dealership to provide favorable responses to the post-purchase survey (Consumer Reports, 2007), while a study by TrueDelta indicated 50% of new car buyers were asked to provide a positive post-purchase

evaluation (TrueDelta, 2007).

Frontline employees asking consumers to provide positive post-purchase evaluations or top box scores has become a somewhat common practice. Yet, little is known about how consumers respond to such requests. In one of the only published studies on the topics, Jones et al. (2014) found requests for positive evaluations actually had a negative impact on customers' reported satisfaction ratings. While the previous study provided an initial investigation of the impact of request for positive evaluations on actual scores using a scenario approach, it focused on broader group level effects and did not explore individual consumer responses beyond customers' reported quantitative scores for satisfaction, repurchase intentions, and word of mouth in response to the scenario. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate consumer responses to frontline employees' requests for positive post-purchase evaluations using real life experiences from consumers' actual service encounters. The current study utilizes a qualitative approach to uncover consumer responses to the request for positive post-purchase evaluation. Exploring consumer responses from a qualitative perspective provides a more complete exploration of the impact of requests for positive evaluation on consumers.

Gaining a better understanding of customer responses to frontline employee requests for post-purchase positive evaluations is important to both marketing theory and practice. It is unknown whether such

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requests have a positive or negative impact on customers beyond the simple impact that it might have on the quantitative survey responses. It is possible that the request has a negative impact on customers' perception of the service experience, the frontline service employee and/or company despite the impact (either positive or negative) on the actual survey responses. Or it is possible that the request has no real meaningful impact on customers' perception of the service experience or company. Since customer satisfaction measurement systems are often the largest annual expenditure on marketing intelligence and often the only systematic research conducted by some firms (Morgan et al., 2005; Wilson, 2002), the results from this study are important as they will help to determine if the satisfaction measurement system is being undermined by this increasingly common practice of requesting positive post-purchase evaluations from consumers.

2. Background

The process of frontline employees attempting to influence customer post-purchase service evaluations has been referred to in a number of different ways. Jones et al. (2014, p. 161–162) refer to '*request for positive evaluation*' to describe the situation in which "employees specifically ask customers for a positive rating or coach customers as to how to complete the survey that will be sent to them after the service encounter." Toister (2017) uses the term '*survey begging*' to describe "asking a customer to give a positive score on a survey by explaining how it will directly benefit the customer, the employee, or both." Finally, Ensing (2017, p. 3) with MaritzCX, a subsidiary of the marketing research company Maritz, considers the broader practice of '*survey manipulation*' in the automotive industry referring to "anything dealership personnel do to encourage customers to misrepresent their actual dealership experiences or to systematically prevent the survey process from accurately measuring the overall dealership experience." The Ensing (2017) definition goes beyond the attempts to persuade customers to give higher evaluations and includes other tactics such as manipulating the sampling selection to encourage more satisfied customers to respond while discouraging dissatisfied customer from responding.

A limitation of the definitions presented by Jones et al. (2014) and Toister (2017) is the focus on verbal communications or the explicit ask for a positive evaluation. Some tactics that have been reported, however, do not include a direct, verbal ask for a positive evaluation, but are clearly designed to skew customer evaluations upward beyond the actual service experience. For example, in a TrueDelta (2007) study that included 1700 new car buyers, 36% of respondents indicated that the salesperson asked them to address the problem rather than reporting them in the survey, two percent of respondents were asked to bring the survey back to the dealership to respond while the service provider watched, and two percent of respondents were offered a gift in exchange for positive evaluations. These three examples in the TrueDelta research are all attempts by frontline employees to manipulate the survey results but do include an explicit ask for positive evaluations as described in previous definitions.

The current study continues referring to the practice as '*request for positive evaluations*' and expands the previous definition developed by Jones et al. (2014) to include both verbal and nonverbal tactics. The current study defines request for positive evaluations as any verbal or nonverbal tactics used by marketers or frontline employees to encourage customers to provide post-purchase evaluation scores that may not truly reflect the customer's actual experience and/or true evaluations. Examples of verbal influence tactics by frontline employees include specific asks for a favorable evaluation or top-box scores, specific instructions on how to complete the survey with top-box scores, and directly asking if there is any reason why the customer cannot provide top-box scores so that the service provider can overcome the deficiency prior to the survey. Examples of nonverbal tactics by frontline employees include providing free gifts prior to the survey, providing the

customer with visual representations of top-box scores, showing the customer a completed survey with top-box scores, staying with the customer while the customer completes the survey, and any of the verbal tactics communicated through nonverbal means such as mail, email, text, or other electronic medium. While the request for post-purchase evaluations is not explicit when nonverbal tactics are used, the request is certainly implied by the nonverbal actions.

While the current study focuses on the request for positive post-purchase evaluations from frontline employees, it should be noted that the request for positive post-purchase evaluations may emanate from anywhere within the organization. The request is often made by retail workers or salespeople since their behavior is often the focus of the evaluation and they may be the only employees with face to face contact with the customers. It is also possible, however, that the motivation for the request for positive post-purchase evaluations stems from a company or department policy that requires frontline employees request positive post-purchase evaluations in an effort to maximize overall company evaluations. Thus, request for positive post-purchase evaluations may reflect a rogue employee who is acting alone in trying to influence a customer's evaluation scores or it may reflect a broader company or departmental practice that is instituted in an effort to increase overall scores for the company or department. Regardless of the motivation, frontline employees are most often the ones who use these tactics to attempt to increase customer evaluations.

3. Method

In-depth interviews were used to investigate consumers' responses to requests for positive post-purchase evaluations following a retail or service encounter. Qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews allow researchers to obtain certain details about consumers' experiences that might not be obtained using other research methods (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In addition, in-depth interviews have been effectively used in previous retailing and service related research exploring consumers' perspectives and experiences relative to emerging topics in the early stages of theory development (Gwinner et al., 1998; Noble and Phillips, 2004; Patwardhan et al., 2009; Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016). Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was believed to have been achieved.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 consumers who had recently been asked by a frontline employee to provide positive evaluations following a transaction. Informants were identified through an institution-wide staff list-serve. The sample included five women and six men who ranged in age from 25 to 57 and had varying degrees of educational attainment. Together, the 11 informants relayed 14 buying experiences that included a specific request for a positive post-purchase evaluation. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 min and each interview was recorded and transcribed. Informants were first qualified as having been asked for positive post-purchase evaluations after a retail or service transaction. Once qualified, dialog began when informants were prompted to "tell me your buying story." Informants then relayed their buying story in which they encountered the request for positive post-purchase evaluations. Follow-up questions focused on consumers' responses to such requests and allowed the informants to elaborate and freely discuss their experiences. Once the informant could provide no additional information regarding their buying story, participants provided their age, occupation, and identified their highest level of education.

The Table presents a profile of each informant including gender, age, occupation, and type of retailer or service provider involved in their buying story. A pseudonym is used to identify each participant and no information which could be used to identify the service providers is disclosed. Buying experiences reflected a variety of retail and service provider types including new automobile dealership, automotive maintenance, appliance and electronics retailer, family physician, hospital, household cleaning service, high-end shoe retailer, pharmacy,

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