

# Engaging Dissatisfied Retail Employees to Voice Promotive Ideas: The Role of Continuance Commitment

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## Abstract

Retailers rely on employees' promotive work-related ideas to spur service delivery innovations. Yet a well-established finding in the literature is that employees refrain from sharing such ideas when they are dissatisfied, and a mountain of evidence suggests that job dissatisfaction is an epidemic in the retail industry. The intuitive solution would be for supervisors to support these employees; by willfully listening to employees' problems and providing help, supervisors could expect employees to voice their ideas. However, our results, from a field study and a controlled experiment, suggest that support should only be provided if a dissatisfied retail employee is also committed to his or her organization out of necessity. Otherwise, support ends up inducing levels of employee voice that are not significantly different than would be the case had the support been withheld, yielding the support a misallocation of effort.

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The academic literature is rife with studies that point to the primary drivers of employee satisfaction (e.g., MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Ahearne 1998). Yet a recent industry survey, conducted by Mercer LLC at the end of 2010, suggests that employee satisfaction remains a major concern in business today – an estimated 32 percent of U.S. employees are ready to quit (Needleman 2011). Another survey, conducted globally, estimates that only 31 percent of employees are engaged (BlessingWhite 2011). That is, despite our extensive knowledge of what leads to job satisfaction, a multitude of deleterious factors – including low pay and limited upward mobility – remain prevalent in practice (Katzenbach and Santamaria 1999; Osterman and Shulman 2011; Segal 2012).

This paper departs from the extant retailing literature in the sense that it investigates employees' reactions to job dissatisfaction, rather than drivers of job satisfaction. The central research question addressed is: how can retailers stimulate dissatisfied employees to react to their dissatisfaction in an active and constructive manner? In particular, our purpose is to

identify conditions under which retail employees who are dissatisfied engage in change-oriented voice behaviors, which we define to be voluntary communication efforts directed at challenging the status quo of a work unit through the suggestion of *creative* and *promotive* solutions (Van Dyne and LePine 1998).

We follow previous research and theorize that voice behaviors are the result of a calculative cognition process, whereby retail employees consider the costs and benefits of speaking up before they decide whether to express their constructive ideas and opinions (cf. Detert and Edmondson 2011; Liang, Farh, and Farh 2012). While a primary benefit or motivation behind employee voice is the hope “to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs” (Hirschman 1970, p. 30), potential costs associated with voice include the potential to initiate interpersonal conflict, the fear of negative feedback, and the risk of being perceived as a troublemaker (LePine and Van Dyne 1998).

Previous authors acknowledge that the voice literature remains scant with respect to studies that examine interactive effects in predicting voice behaviors. For instance, Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) state that “the relationships between voice and some of its antecedents may be more nuanced than previously assumed” (p. 1190). Others suggest that proximal or transient influences are likely to impact employees' voice behaviors (Liang, Farh, and Farh 2012; Venkataramani and

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Tangirala 2010). Still others are proponents of studies that “develop predictive models that consider the independent and joint effects of theoretically relevant personal and situational variables” (LePine and Van Dyne 1998, p. 855).

We respond to these calls for research by investigating how continuance commitment (i.e., a retail employee’s calculative attachment to his or her organization) and supervisor support impact the job dissatisfaction – voice behaviors relationship. By means of a field study, we find that these factors play a critical role for retail employees who have low levels of job satisfaction. In our sample, relatively unsatisfied employees contributed to a voluntary service development program, by suggesting creative solutions to problems and encouraging others to do the same, more frequently if they felt stuck in their current organization and worked for a supportive supervisor. By contrast, the relatively unsatisfied employees who instead perceived alternative employment options to be available elsewhere were less likely to contribute even when supervisor support was provided.

We extend this key finding with a controlled experiment. Chief among our goals here was to directly analyze a situation where individuals were reacting to a disaffecting environment. The results mirror those found in the field and suggest that supervisors’ supportive efforts are not answered with greater likelihoods of employee voice when dissatisfied retail employees have ample external employment options. Regardless of a supervisor’s support, these employees are relatively unlikely to share their constructive ideas. It follows that supervisors are better off spending their limited time and resources to support dissatisfied employees who are committed to their organization out of necessity.

Theoretical and managerial implications of these findings are covered in the discussion section of this paper. First, however, we provide a theoretical overview of exit-voice theory, the framework we use to motivate the study of employee voice, and develop our central hypothesis. A complete discussion of the two studies we employ in this paper is couched between these two sections.

## Theoretical and hypotheses development

### *Exit-voice theory*

Within the realm of internal marketing, exit-voice theory refers to the four reactions employees may have to job dissatisfaction (Farrell 1983; Hirschman 1970). Among them are *exit* (to voluntarily depart from an organization), *neglect* (to withdraw from work psychologically or behaviorally), *loyalty* (to remain committed, hoping that change is on the horizon), and *voice* (to advocate change with respect to some source of unrest). Importantly, the only reaction that constitutes an active, constructive response is voice (Rusbult et al. 1988). Recognizing this distinguishing characteristic and the fundamental role that voice plays in business relationships, marketing scholars have devoted considerable attention to the study of voice in the inter-firm context (e.g., Ping 1997) and in the consumer complaint behaviors literature (e.g., Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008; Singh 1990).

However, this research stream has yet to transcend to the internal marketing context in the marketing literature.

That being said, the management literature has made notable progress developing and testing conceptual models centered around voice when employees are the purveyors. In this literature, voice is conceptualized as an employee behavior that is discretionary, communicative, and challenging in nature with regards to some status quo (LePine and Van Dyne 1998; Van Dyne and LePine 1998). Voice can be studied laterally (i.e., peer-to-peer; Edmondson 1999) or vertically (i.e., subordinate-to-supervisor; Burris, Detert, and Chiaburu 2008; Detert and Burris 2007; Gao, Janssen, and Shi 2011; Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, and Kamdar 2011). And employee voice can take on either a promotive tone, in which case challenging statements are complemented with suggestions for improvement, or a prohibitive tone, in which case problems are raised without an accompanied plan for resolution (Liang, Farh, and Farh 2012). We study voice in the vertical realm where voice is promotive in nature. Examples of these types of voice behaviors may include making helpful recommendations to one’s supervisor concerning problems that customers face or getting involved in service development planning by sharing creative solutions. On these grounds, we delineate this paper’s scope and define retail employee voice as:

Voluntary communication effort that is conveyed by retail employees to their supervisors and directed at challenging the status quo of a work unit through the suggestion of creative and promotive solutions.

Furthermore, given that customer service delivery innovations are an emerging research topic in the marketing literature (Ostrom et al. 2010), we study voice in the realm of retail employees’ change-oriented suggestions regarding the delivery of services to a retailer’s new or existing customers (e.g., Chen, Tsou, and Huang 2009; Ordanini and Parasuraman 2011; Umashankar, Srinivasan, and Hindman 2011). In our first study, we employ a unique dataset that captures retail employees’ voluntary contributions to a service development program that was launched to facilitate voice behaviors. In our second study, we present our experiment’s participants with a voice opportunity that poses to improve the service provided to a retailer’s customer base. Next, we develop our central hypothesis.

### *The job dissatisfaction – employee voice relationship*

Employees are less likely to share their suggestions for improvement when they are less satisfied with their job (e.g., Brehm 1966; LePine and Van Dyne 1998; Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, and Kamdar 2011; Ng and Feldman 2011; Rusbult et al. 1988). The psychological driver behind this effect can be explained as follows: when employees are dissatisfied with the salient aspects of their job, they are likely to enter into an economic exchange with their employer (Blau 1964). Under such circumstances, employees form relations with organizations on a quid pro quo basis, exchanging their services for a salary on a tit-for-tat basis. This situation makes it unlikely that voice, which is an extra-role behavior (Van Dyne and LePine 1998),

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