

A Conceptual Model of Customer Advocacy in Services Marketing: A Definition and Key Antecedents

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Abstract

This paper investigates customer advocacy (CA) as a type of extra-role helping behaviour within the context of service failures and recovery processes. CA is distinct from customer service as it places the customer's interest at the forefront which is not necessarily in the best interest of the organisation. CA presents service organisations with opportunities to increase sales and loyalty (Urban, 2005). Despite this potential, limited research has empirically examined this phenomenon in marketing. This paper fills this gap by examining the concept of customer advocacy in the context of service failures and recovery. We present a conceptual model that aims to understand the phenomenon of CA and identify its antecedents from a frontline employee's perspective.

Keywords: service failures and recovery, customer advocacy and frontline employee

Introduction and Background

The term 'advocacy' has been widely applied in numerous disciplines including law, public policy, nursing, marketing, and accounting. Broadly defined, advocacy means 'to recommend' or to 'be in favour of' and this role has been widely recognised in the legal system as one who pleads on behalf of another (OED, 1989). A 'customer advocate' in marketing contexts is defined as one who faithfully represents the customer's interest (Urban, 2005). To date, research in CA has not been empirically examined and marketing research has primarily investigated CA as a form of customer value-adding strategy (Anonymous, 2005; Lawer and Knox, 2006; Urban, 2004, 2005). Anecdotal evidence suggests frontline employees do engage in pro-customer behaviours (Johnston, 1995); however these aspects have been largely ignored in literature. Existing models of extra-role behaviour in management and marketing have tended to be pro-organisational and do not address the complexities involved in pro-customer behaviours (e.g. Bettencourt, Gwinner and Meuter, 2001; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2003). This is lacking because CA stems from the belief that the customer's interest is of paramount importance, hence if strategically nurtured it has the potential to evolve as a proactive organisational philosophy with considerable economic benefits. It presents opportunities for customer-oriented service organisations to increase purchases and customer loyalty (Urban, 2005).

Overview of Literature

Customer Advocacy

This paper investigates CA as a type of extra-role helping behaviour within the context of service failures and recovery processes. Extra-role behaviours within customer service context are defined as "discretionary behaviours of frontline employees in servicing customers that extend beyond formal role requirements" (Bettencourt and Brown 1997, p. 41). Most service organisations are profit driven and frontline employees' customer responsive actions sometimes do conflict with this priority which puts the frontline employee in a position of risk

(Kimberly, Kidder and Litzky, 2002). To explore the concept of customer advocacy requires investigation of the broader theoretical category of extra-role behaviour, a diagrammatic representation of the classifications within the helping literature can be seen in the appendix. Extra-role behaviours are a sub-set of this global construct (King, George and Hebl, 2005). This behaviour research in management and marketing has been studied under varying rubrics such as the heavily researched organisational citizenship behaviours (OCBs), organisational spontaneity, contextual performance, pro-social organisational behaviours. Indeed, the list is exhaustive and at times overlapping. We argue that CA is related to, but conceptually distinct from, these forms of extra-role behaviours. It differentiates on the basis of its intended beneficiary of the act and its functionality to the organisation. (See Appendix 1)

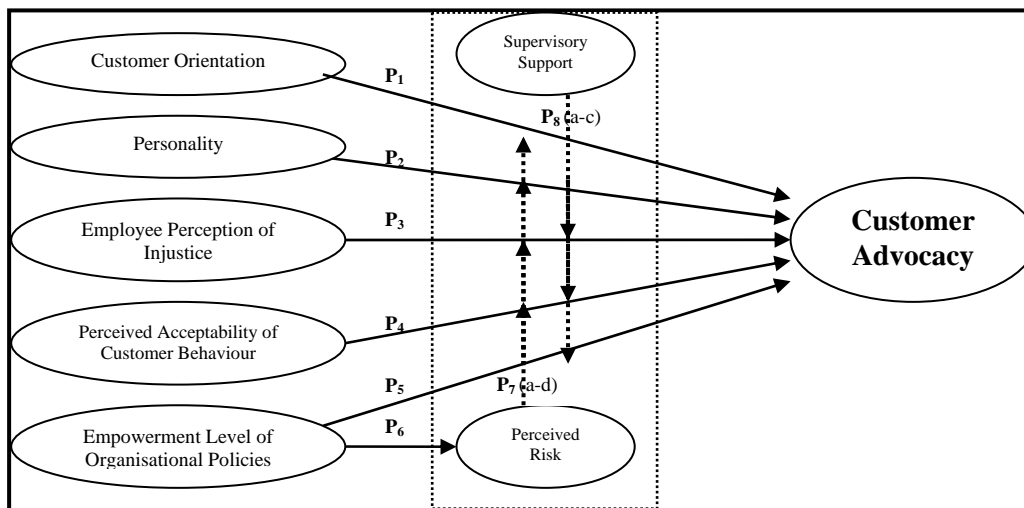
Pro-social organisational behaviour has often been examined as a first degree construct in management and marketing. Its broad definition contains almost all behaviours that occur within an organisation that is directed to others (Van Dyne, Cummings and Parks, 1995). CA is a specific type of pro-social behaviour within a broader set that contains varying individual consequences and organisational effectiveness (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). A further examination of the literature suggests that the intended beneficiary may differ between organisation and co-workers; constituency, community, society in general and the customer. These behaviours could also be functional or dysfunctional to the organisation's interest. Behaviours that tend to benefit the organisation and/or co-workers include organisational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) (e.g. Van Dyne, Graham and Dienesch, 1994), organisational spontaneity (George and Brief, 1992), contextual performance (Borman and Motowidlo, 1993), taking charge (Morrison and Phelps, 1999) and personal initiative (Frese et al., 1996). Recent studies has expanded the domain by studying behaviours functional to the organisation but directed at customers, termed service-oriented OCB (e.g. Schneider et al., 2005) and customer service citizenship behaviours (Vaughan and Renn, 1999). Other research has investigated citizenship behaviours from customers' perspective, termed customer citizenship behaviour (CCB) (Groth, 2005). In all, these concepts are pro-organisational, particularly those studied under the label of citizenship. They differ on characteristics such as time orientation, motives and approach. Behaviours such as whistle-blowing (Near and Miceli, 1985) and principled organisational dissent (Graham, 1986) are potentially dysfunctional for the organisation and are usually directed at the constituency, community, society, or to serve personal interests. These are challenging behaviours that are usually enacted for super-organisational interests.

CA is positioned into the classification of extra-role behaviours that benefits customers but may be either organisationally functional or dysfunctional. While customer service is directed at customers, this tends to be driven by organisational intent on generating profit, loyalty and other organisation outcomes. The primary means of serving the customer is to meet the employing organisation's expectations. Investigating from a frontline employee perspective, we define CA in a service failure and recovery context as "a frontline employee going 'above and beyond' the call of duty in the best interests of the customer to influence the quality of service practices, which may or may not be consistent with expectations of the service organisation they serve." This definition highlights extra-role helping behaviours that; (1) have an active connotation, (2) focuses on and benefits the customer interest, and (3) likely to contain behaviours that are extreme and could possibly be dysfunctional to the service organisation.

Antecedents

This paper presents a conceptual model comprising of three categories of antecedents classified as individual, situational and organisation characteristics. Individual characteristics comprise employee personality and customer orientation; situational characteristics comprise employee perception of injustice and employee perceived acceptability of customer behaviour. Lastly, organisation characteristics comprise empowerment level of organisation policies and supervisory support. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Key Antecedents of Customer Advocacy in Service Failures and Recovery Context



Customer Orientation: Customer orientation (CO) is defined as an employee's predisposition or tendency to meet customers' needs (Brown et al., 2002). Service quality researchers have demonstrated that aspects of contact employees' behaviours do determine how customers perceive service quality, for example, the display of assurance and empathy (Cronin and Taylor, 1992) and certain frontline employees are more predisposed to practice service oriented behaviours than others (Liao and Chuang, 2004). Research has also found that highly customer oriented service employees tended to display extra-role behaviours (Bettencourt et al., 2001). Hence, we predict CO is likely to motivate CA behaviours and we revisit this relationship to posit, P1: Customer orientation is likely to be positively related to CA.

Personality: Individual characteristics in personality have been well researched as a predictor of extra-role behaviours (Borman and Motowidlo, 1993; Organ, 1994). In services marketing, Lanjananda and Patterson (2005) found that personality was more important than service climate in predicting extra-role behaviours. The theoretical basis of personality as a predictor is personality emerges strongly in situations which are unclear, for example, complaint situations (Mischel, 1977). Fit theory also suggests that performance is enhanced when a personality and demands of the task are matched (Comeau and Griffith, 2004). Therefore, we expect personality traits of agreeableness, extraversion and openness to experience to correlate with CA. Thus,

P2: Personality traits of agreeableness, extraversion and openness to experience are likely to be positively related to CA.

Frontline Employee Perception of Injustice: Perceived justice is conceptualized as a three dimensional concept of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (Tax and

Chandrashekar, 1998). Justice theory is relevant towards understanding reactions involving conflict situations (Homburg and Fürst, 2005). While justice theory based literature have identified service recovery organisational responses, for example refunds (e.g. Davidow, 2003), little is known about what drives these organisational responses. The management literature highlights employees do recognize injustice that occurs to others (Kray and Lind, 2002) and the services marketing literature provides evidence of frontline employees serving customers beyond resources and responsiveness (Johnston, 1995). For example, an employee might not sell a product to a customer if they believed the customer was duped in an unfair situation. Thus, it is likely that frontline employees respond positively in advocating helping customers in such predicaments. Hence, P3: Frontline employee perceptions of injustice are likely to be positively related to CA.

Employee Perceived Acceptability of the Customer's Behaviour: The nature of service work involves interaction with customers who may violate expected behaviour (Bitner, Booms and Mohr, 1994). Previous research has found that customer behaviours have negative impacts on the mood or temper of employees (Harris and Reynolds, 2003), resulting in burnout tendencies (Ben-Zur and Yagil, 2005) and emotional exhaustion and emotional regulation (Grandey, Dickter and Sin, 2004). Specifically, Dormann and Zapf (2004) found that verbal aggression displayed by customers is a serious stressor for frontline employees. Conversely, contagion research supports that customers who behave functionally are more likely to evoke a good cheer by the frontline employee (Tan, Foo and Kwek, 2004). These customers display emotional fronts of smiles, friendliness and courtesy to the employee. On this basis, we propose that frontline employees' perception of the acceptability of these behaviours is likely to influence their extra-role behaviours. Hence, P4: Frontline employees' perception of the appropriateness of customer behaviour is likely to be positively related to CA.

Empowerment Level of Organisational Policies: Guidelines on complaint management are important in driving service employee behaviour (Humburg and Fürst, 2005). Previous research suggests that organisational policies influence fairness perceptions and attributions of responsibility (Korsgaard, Brodt and Whitener, 2002). Favourable policies tended to stimulate reciprocal citizenship behaviours (Chiu and Ng, 2001). An inverted U-shape relationship is predicted for organisational policies on CA. That is, if the standard protocols do not adequately protect or are unfair to the customer, frontline employees may not be willing to comply with these policies and norms. We propose that moderately flexible empowering organisational policies are more likely to evoke CA. Moderately flexible policies are characterised by less rigidity and enforceability as opposed to policies which are not at all empowering. An example of moderately flexible policy would be a policy that sets out a broad range of compensation options for service recovery, but leaves the actual offer to the discretion of the employee. This results from less perceived risk involved, yet going beyond one's role to remedy inadequate organisational policies. Thus, P5: Moderately flexible empowering organisation policies are likely to be positively related to CA.

The empowerment level of organisational policies is likely to directly influence perception of risk. Organisation innovation research seems to support this argument. Organic structures that emphasizes on decentralization tended to produce innovation while formalized structures tended to induce impede innovations due to the expected behaviours involved (e.g. Pierce and Delbecq, 1976; Spender and Kessler, 1995). This results because perceived risk is heightened with a codified body of rules and procedures. Thus, we propose that when more discretion is provided to the frontline employee with service policies, less risk is perceived when they decide to represent a customer. Hence, P6: The empowerment level of organisation policies

is likely to be negatively related to the frontline employee's level of perceived risk in engaging in CA.

Employee Perception of Risk: Perceived risk is defined as the possibility of loss driven by both the probability and the severity of the outcome (Oglethorpe and Monroe, 1994). Information processing theory suggests that based on perceptions and judgments, one would assess the risks associated with their behaviours (Taylor, 1974). Perceived risk is proposed to be a potential moderator on customer orientation, personality, frontline employee perception of injustice and employee perceived acceptability of the customer's behaviour and CA. It seems reasonable to expect frontline employees who are prone to help customers in certain situations to exhibit less least extreme CA when their perceptions of risk increase. Weaker relationships are expected in high perceived risk conditions caused by deterrent effects of perceived consequences (Hollinger and Clark, 1983). Thus, P7(a-d): Employee perceived risk is likely to negatively moderate the relationship between CO, frontline employee perception of injustice, employee perceived acceptability of the customer's behaviour and CA.

Supervisory Support: Supervisory support is defined as the degree of support expressed by the immediate supervisor or manager of the subordinate (Michaels and Spector, 1982). Regarded as a form of social buffer, Bell et al., (2004) report that as complaints increase, positive relationship of supervisory support and commitment to customer service increases. Frontline employees with supervisory support are more likely to put themselves at risk to achieve goals set by their leader (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002) or risk failure without fear of consequences (Kahn, 1990). Supervisory support is proposed to be a moderator based on the demand-support-control model; as social support increases intrinsic motivation regardless of work demands and control (e.g. Van Yperan and Hagedoorn, 2003). Frontline employees are expected to exhibit higher levels of CA despite work demands and control due to supervisory support. Hence, P8(a-c): Supervisory support is likely to positively moderate the relationship between frontline employee perception of injustice, employee perceived acceptability of the customer's behaviour, empowerment level of organisational policies and CA.

Contributions to Theory and Practice

This paper contributes to marketing theory because it investigates a new concept of customer advocacy in a service marketing context. CA is a more holistic approach towards understanding complex extra-role behaviours in marketing. The hypotheses presented will be tested in series of studies that involve interviews and experimental surveys. This paper advantages service practitioners because of an understanding of CA and its antecedents. For instance, managers who are unfamiliar with CA may misunderstand CA as unwarranted behaviours.

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