

Complaints about Food, Meals and Beverages in West Germany

O. BAYER, U. OLTERSODORF and H.-J. ULRICH

Federal Research Centre for Nutrition, Institute of Nutritional Economics and Sociology, Stuttgart-Hohenheim, Germany

The conditions, processes and effects of complaining behaviour depend on many factors and therefore are not easy to explain. Nobody should expect there to be one homogeneous theory of complaints by consumers. The various approaches to this topic include cost-benefit, risk and complexity, as well as involvement, learning, personality, resource and attribution models.

Furthermore, the specific competitive situation in the market influences complaining behaviour to a considerable extent. The consumer switches shop, restaurant or brand rather than complain about it, if that market is very competitive.

A complaint usually develops out of dissatisfaction; nevertheless, this dissatisfaction may remain latent. If dissatisfaction rises to an unbearable level, it will lead to a manifest reaction and that can be diverse (Figure 1; Day & Landon, 1977; Graf, 1990; Riemer, 1986). This study covered "public alternatives", to the right side of this diagram.

A representative sample ($n=2000$) of the West German population was questioned concerning their complaints about food, meals and beverages. The fieldwork

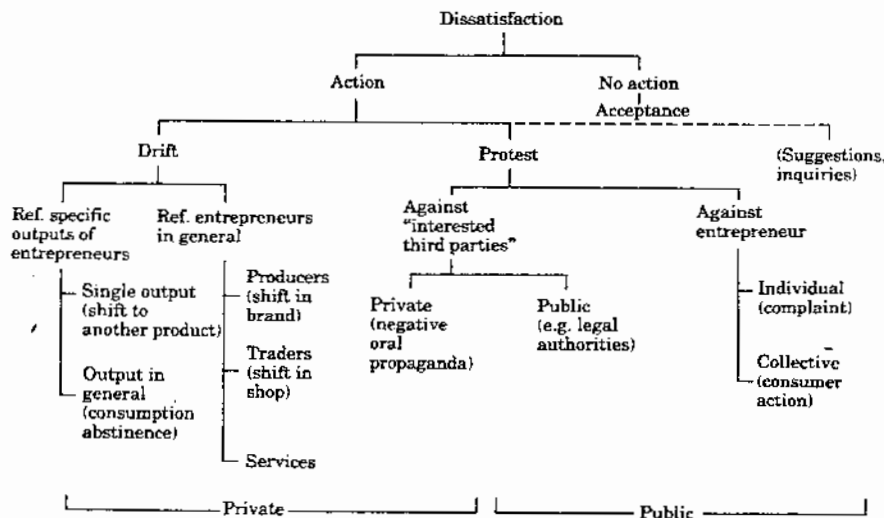


FIGURE 1. Alternative reaction to consumers on dissatisfaction (according to GRAF 1990).

Address correspondence to: Prof. Dr. U. Oltersdorf, Bundesforschungsanstalt für Ernährung, Institut für Ernährungswirtschaft und -soziologie, Postfach 7201 40, D-70577 Stuttgart, Germany.

was done in fall 1991 by the market and opinion research institute GFM-GETAS, Hamburg.

More than 25% ($n=509$) had had some reason to complain, i.e. had become aware of some defect. Two-thirds of these had actually made one or more complaints. The reasons reported were: bad quality of the food (43%), insufficient preparation of the meals (33%), insufficient services in restaurants (16%) and expired dates (11%).

The claims were made at appropriate places, i.e. 62% in shops and 41% in restaurants, with only 5% going to the producer. Most (80%) stated that they reached their goals "always" and 14% "sometimes". In 83% of the cases, they got replacements, for 9% there was a price reduction and for 14% they were asked to excuse the fault.

The distribution of reasons of those who had actually complained was nearly the same as those of the respondents who would have had reason to complain. The reasons given for not complaining were: "too much work" (39%), "felt uncomfortable to complain" (29%), "would have taken too much time" (17%) and "didn't know to whom to complain" (11%).

As a second step, we contrasted the non-complainers with the ones who actually complained, who were twice as many in the whole sample. Women were more critical than men when shopping for food and eating meals. More often they pretended to have reasons for complaining. Women seem to be more experienced in deciding if a complaint is appropriate. People who were 50 years and older noted defects of foods, beverages and meals in restaurants less often than the age group of 35 to 50 years old, independently of gender.

Answers to the question whether the controls in the food sector in Germany are sufficiently effective or not were associated with attitude. Those who had no strong opinion on controls think that they have no reasons to complain. On the other hand, the complainers argue that more controls were necessary and their reasons for complaining were above average ranking.

The attitudes that complaining is appropriate was readily explained by perceptions and behaviour. The survey respondents with the opinion that "complaining is connected with inconvenience/discomfort" had fewer reasons to complain. Responses to the statement, "one should only complain if one has a very important reason" could be interpreted similarly. Those who agree with this statement also have fewer reasons to complain. Those who complained least were more often undecided whether additional food controls are necessary or not. However, people who think that the controls are sufficient surprisingly complain most. Apparently, they do not think that their trust in the controls of the food sector is incompatible with their reasons to complain about the defects still remaining.

Consumers who avoided conflicts ("Complaining is always connected with trouble for oneself") complained less often about food, drinks and meals.

The last group of complainers, who state that producers and salespersons take complaints very seriously and react in an appropriate way, complain more often than others; presumably they are influenced by the success of their complaints. The ones who think that the consumer should complain only if there is an important reason for it, complain less seldom.

Day (1984) tried to explain the complaining behaviour of consumers in terms of awareness of costs for complaining, subjective probability that complaining will be successful, and attitude towards complaining as a suitable form of behaviour. Figure 2 contains the main results from this survey which relate to this model.

| Influences on complaining behavior (Day, 1984) | | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|
| Comparison: | Awareness of costs for complaining | Subjective probability that complaining will be successful: | | Attitude towards complaining as a suitable form of behavior | |
| Those who become aware of deficits of food quality (vs. those who do not become aware) | (mostly female) ...advocate more control of the food chain | (< 50 years) | ... do not agree that complaining only causes trouble to oneself | ...reject the statement that one should complain only if there is really a reason | |
| Those who in addition really complain (vs. those who do not complain) | (mostly female) ...reject more control of the food chain | (35-50 year old) | ...do not agree that complaining only causes trouble to oneself | ...reject the statement that one should complain only if there is really a reason | ...agree that "producer and retailer take complaint really seriously" |
| Provisional explanatory dimensions: | (Competence) | (Optimism) | (conflict-readiness) | (Civil rights orientation) | (Confidence in institutional settings) |

FIGURE 2. Hypotheses for explanation of complaining behaviour.

Competence in the food sector is the explanatory dimension for women. It is related to the "costs of complaining". For those who really complain competence is also the decisive dimension.

Optimism and less authoritarian attitudes among younger adults could explain this result; thus is related to factor successful complaining. Conflict-readiness means the attitude that one should accept trouble for oneself if it is necessary. *Civil rights orientation* may cause both groups to reject the idea of complaining only if there is a reason.

The complaining behaviour of consumers cannot be explained only by one theory. Each theoretical approach puts a spotlight on a different part of this complex process and contrasts some factors more than others. The empirical data in social science cannot decide between true and false theoretical approaches, because the concrete behaviour of the individuals is not very consistent across populations. Nevertheless it is necessary to explore the consumer behaviour empirically. Only in this way may we recognize new aspects and avoid mere speculation.

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