Consumer politeness and complaining behavior

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Abstract
Purpose – Aims to examine consumer politeness, an interaction style that may prevent a dissatisfied customer from complaining about a negative service encounter, and seeks to determine the relationship between politeness and the propensity to engage in various types of complaining behavior.

Design/methodology/approach – Two surveys served to develop and validate a scale for measuring politeness and tested the relationship between consumer politeness and complaining behavior. The specific items for the politeness scale were developed based on the distinction between negative and positive politeness as described by politeness theory.

Findings – The results suggest an inverse relationship between politeness and complaining behavior. The studies also find that polite and impolite consumers do not necessarily engage in the same types of complaining behavior.

Research limitations/implications – In future studies, researchers may consider examining the conditions under which polite consumers do and do not voice complaints. Researchers may also consider investigating the possibility of a relationship between politeness and the opposite of complaining behavior, i.e. complimenting behavior.

Practical implications – Given that voice offers managers an opportunity to identify and then remedy problems, they should look for non-threatening ways to encourage consumers to engage in this behavior. Managers may, for example, consider using positive politeness as a means for soliciting complaints.

Originality/value – This study introduces a sociolinguistic construct to help explain propensity to engage in complaining behavior. As such, it serves to identify and isolate one of the challenges managers face in addressing consumer complaints across a variety of service industries.

Keywords Complaints, Consumer behaviour, Linguistics, Social interaction

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers can be found at the end of this article.

Companies have become increasingly interested in hearing from their customers. Dissatisfied customers, in particular, are often encouraged to communicate their complaints to company service representatives over the telephone (Garrett and Meyers, 1996). Research suggests that in many cases, companies make good-faith efforts to address the complaints of these dissatisfied customers. Many managers, for example, are often prepared to exceed consumer expectations in striving to address complaints (Resnik and Harmon, 1983). Given the direct relationship between customer satisfaction and company profitability (Gurai and Ranchhod, 2002; Yeung et al., 2002; Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004), such efforts to resolve customer complaints make good business sense.

Unfortunately, the number of complaints received by a company may not always be a good measure of customer satisfaction. This is because not all disgruntled consumers complain (Best and Andreasen, 1977; Day et al., 1981; Hupperts, 2003). Instead of complaining, a dissatisfied customer may terminate the relationship or “suffer in silence confident that things will get better soon” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 38). The decision not to complain may be situational (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981). For example, a dissatisfied customer may not have the time to wait for a manager and decide instead to leave the store.

Some consumers may be unlikely to complain regardless of the context. More specifically, they may have an interaction style that prevents them from confronting retail employees. Politeness may have such an effect. Politeness has already been identified as an interaction style within customer-salesperson encounters by Goodwin and Smith (1990). Although Goodwin and Smith (1990) focused on service provider politeness and its effect on customer comfort and satisfaction, politeness is not restricted to service providers. For example, a consumer may not interrupt salesperson speaking on the telephone in order to ask a question or purchase an item even if the call is obviously a personal one. From the consumer’s perspective, doing so would be rude despite the fact that the salesperson is not fulfilling the duties of his or her job and his/her responsibilities to the customer by talking on the phone. In this case, consumer politeness may prevent salesperson-customer interaction from occurring at all and the retailer may lose the sale.

Although interaction style has been studied with respect to complaining behavior, politeness as a specific type of interaction style has not. The purpose of this paper is to examine politeness as an interaction style and determine the relationship between politeness and the propensity to engage in the three types of complaining behavior identified in the literature: voice, private actions, and third party actions. More specifically, this paper discusses politeness theory and its relevance to complaining behavior, reports on two studies designed to test the relationship between politeness and various types of complaining behavior, and discusses the implications of the results for both researchers and managers.
Politeness theory

Politeness has been studied extensively in the sociolinguistics literature where it has been recognized as a verbal style used by a speaker to maintain the listener’s face (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Clark and Schunk, 1980; Lakoff, 1973, 1977). Goffman (1967) defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself.” In their theory of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) distinguish between two kinds of face: positive and negative. Positive face concerns the need for approval. As such, it recognizes that we each have a self-image and hope that other people see us as we see ourselves. Negative face concerns the desire to be unimpeded in one’s actions. Both positive and negative face are “emotionally invested” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). That is, face is internalized and like with other feelings, outsiders can offend or enhance it. Since people defend their face when threatened, maintaining one’s face requires the maintenance of everyone else’s face. It is therefore in the general interest to maintain each other’s face (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The “kernel idea” of politeness theory is that “some acts are intrinsically threatening to face and thus require ‘softening’” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 24). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a speaker may seek to maintain or enhance the addressee’s positive face and/or negative face. In doing so, the speaker would employ “positive politeness” and “negative politeness” respectively. Positive politeness expresses an appreciation of the other person’s wants and in doing so conveys a sense of similarity and solidarity. Negative politeness, on the other hand, is characterized by self-effacement, formality, and restraint. In using this avoidance-based approach, speakers pay the ultimate in respect to their addressees (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The degree to which an individual is polite in a given situation is often sociologically based. In particular, Brown and Levinson (1987) cite three sociological factors that are crucial in determining the level of politeness which a speaker (S) will use with an addressee (H): (1) The relative power of H over S. (2) The social distance between H and S. (3) The ranking of the imposition involved in doing the face-threatening act.

Studies have shown, however, that children acquire communicative norms and interactional styles at a rather young age, long before they can determine and respond to these sociologically factors (Newcombe and Zaslow, 1981). To some degree, styles may develop as a result of gender (Edelsky, 1977; Hibbard and Buhrmester, 1998; Maltz and Borker, 1982), culture (Blum-Kulka and Olshaint, 1984; Cohen et al., 1999), or race (Weigel and Weigel, 1985). In any of these cases, an individual’s style will serve as an undercurrent for all of his/her interactions independent of the various sociological factors present in a given situation (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The role of politeness in consumer complaining behavior

Based on an empirically tested taxonomy, Singh (1988) identified three types of complaining behavior: voice, third-party actions, and private actions. For the most part, voice refers to complaining behavior directed toward the offending party. A consumer who confronts a retailer or manufacturer, whether in person, in writing, or by telephone, would be exhibiting voice. Third-party action, on the other hand, refers to complaints expressed to an external party not directly involved with the offending service provider but who may have some authority or influence over it. Consumers who contact consumer protection agencies, lawyers, or newspapers as a result of a dissatisfying experience with a retailer or service provider are taking third-party actions. Finally, private action refers to behavior exhibited within a consumer’s own social circle of which the consumer is part. Such behavior can range from warning friends and families not to use that service provider to deciding not to purchase from there again (Singh, 1988).

Numerous antecedents to the propensity to engage in these complaining behaviors have been identified including industry (Singh, 1991), culture (Hernandez et al., 1991; Watkins and Liu, 1996), demographics such as age and gender (Bernhardt, 1981; Kolodinsky, 1995), prior consumer expectations and experiences (Bearden and Teel, 1983; Hupperts, 2003), and the reasons for product or service failure (Best and Andreasen, 1977; Folkes, 1984; Folkes et al., 1987). In addition, Richins (1983) performed a study that simultaneously considered interactions styles and complaining behavior. Her study, however, was conducted before the development of the Singh taxonomy and given its interest in aggressiveness, only examined what can be considered the propensity to voice complaints. On the other hand, this research considers the relationship between a particular interaction style and all three types of complaining behavior.

The choice of politeness as an interaction style to be studied with respect to consumer complaining behavior makes sense because complaining is by its very nature a face-threatening act. To the degree that a consumer does not want to insult another, he will not engage in complaining behavior. This may hold regardless of the fact that the consumer may have been insulted by virtue of the fact that a given experience was disdissatisfying and that he would be defending his own face by complaining. A consumer may fear further insult by complaining, especially if he believes that the retailer will refuse to take corrective action. As such, it is hypothesized that:

H1. As the tendency to be polite increases, complaining behavior decreases.

A consumer seeking to minimize face-damage will be especially unlikely to engage in direct forms of complaining behavior. Since voice requires direct confrontation with the service provider, it is hypothesized that:

H2. As the tendency to be polite increases, the use of voice as a complaint behavior decreases.

Although third-party actions are less direct than voiced complaints in that a consumer does not directly confront the service provider, this type of complaining behavior often results in some sort of public condemnation (e.g. lawsuit, bad press, etc.). As such, third-party actions can be quite damaging. The following hypothesis is thus posited:

H3. As the tendency to be polite increases, the use of third-party action as a complaining behavior decreases.

Unlike voiced complaints and third-party action, private actions are internally-oriented. Through private actions, a consumer can express his/her dissatisfaction without directly
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It is expected then that consumers will take private actions independent of the propensity to be polite. As such, it is hypothesized that:

H4. The tendency to be polite is uncorrelated with the use of private actions.

As has already been suggested, private action is the least threatening of the three complaining behaviors because a consumer can express his dissatisfaction without confronting or publicly humiliating the service provider. On the other hand, the other end of the spectrum, voice should be most threatening since it requires direct confrontation between the customer and the service provider. Although third-party action may have more severe consequences for a service provider than would voiced complaints, the consumer does not engage in direct confrontation. The reader will recall from politeness theory that people defend their face when threatened by offending the face of the other party. Within the retail setting, for example, a manager listening to a customer complaint about a product may tell the customer that he fails to see the problem or even accuse the customer of using the product improperly.

Methodology

A total of 49 undergraduate students (45.8 percent male, 54.2 percent female) across two international business classes responded to a survey. Ages ranged from 19 to 46 with a mean of 25.4. Although 45.8 percent said that they speak a language other than English, the wide variety of languages mentioned prevented any meaningful analysis of language effects.

Complaining behavior scale

The questionnaire contained an adapted version of the ten-item complaining behavior scale developed and tested by Singh (1988). According to Singh (1988), this scale contains three subscales, one for voice, one for private actions, and one for third-party actions. Although the three-factor model fit the data (χ² = 13.938, df = 18, p < 0.73), the loading pattern was unclear. Instead of a pattern whereby voice, third-party action, and private action each constituted a factor, voice and third-party items loaded on factor two and private action items loaded on both factors one and three.

Given the unexpected and uninterpretable loading pattern, the data was reanalyzed using exploratory factor analysis. Following this analysis, two items were dropped due to low loadings. This scale purification resulted in a two factor solution whereby all voice and third party action items loaded clearly on factor one and all private action items loaded clearly on factor two. This solution is consistent with the conceptualization of the three types of complaining behavior in that voice and third party actions are externally-oriented and private action is internally-oriented (Singh, 1988). A further distinction may be made in that voice and third-party actions are entirely verbal behaviors whereas private actions may be verbal (e.g. telling friends) or behavioral (e.g. never returning to the store again).

The reliability of the eight-item complaining behavior scale was 0.82 versus 0.84 for the full ten-item version as observed by Singh (1988). Thus, the elimination of two items did not significantly reduce reliability. The reliability of the voice, third-party, and private action subscales was 0.71, 0.87, and 0.71 respectively. With the exception of the reliability of the private action subscale, these reliabilities meet or exceed those by Singh (1988).

Politeness scale

No established scale for measuring politeness exists in the literature. Thus, the face-threatening acts listed by Brown and Levinson (1987) were used as a basis for generating items measuring politeness (see Table I).

Careful attention was paid to balancing the number of positively worded and negatively worded items. Given the kind of acts cited as face-threatening and the relationship between these acts and politeness, it made sense for many of the items to be negatively worded.

As recommended by Schriesheim et al. (1993), the initial scale was submitted to five adults in a focus group setting who judged the relevance of each question to negative and positive politeness and assessed item clarity. Based on their suggestions, the items were slightly revised. All 25 items were retained for inclusion in the final questionnaire. It was expected, however, that the scale would need to be purified

Table I  Face threatening acts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive face-threatening acts</th>
<th>Expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complaints, reprimands, accusations and insults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contradictions, disagreements, and challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressions of violent or out-of-control emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Irreverence or mention of taboo topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bringing bad news about addressee or boasting about self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raising emotionally-charged or divisive topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blatant non-cooperation (interruption)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wrong use of address terms or status markers in initial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>encounters</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative face-threatening acts</th>
<th>Orders and requests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suggestions and advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reminders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threats, warnings, and dares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compliments, expressions of envy or admiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressions of strong negative emotions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Brown and Levinson (1987)
and that the final scale used to measure politeness and test the hypotheses would be much shorter.

Purification of the politeness scale involved assessment of reliability, inter-item and item-to-total correlations and factor patterns. This was an iterative process. The final scale contains six items (see Table II) that load on a single factor explaining 51.0 percent of the variance.

Reliability of the scale was 0.80 which is considered “very good” (DeVellis, 1991, p. 85) particularly given its short length. Although Brown and Levinson (1987) conceive of two types of politeness – positive and negative – the data supports a unidimensional construct. The presence of three negative politeness items and three positive politeness items in a single solution, however, suggests that the two types of politeness are both important to politeness as a whole.

Measure of convergent validity
In order to provide a measure of convergent validity, two open-ended questions were developed, one for the politeness scale and one for the complaining behavior scale. The open-ended politeness question asked subjects to “please describe up to five things you say or do when you receive a telephone call from someone soliciting donations for a cause that you are unfamiliar with.” Similarly, the open-ended complaining behavior question asked subjects to “please describe up to five things that you say or do when you are dissatisfied with a retailer or other service provider.”

Following the data collection, subjects’ responses to the open format items were quantified for data analysis purposes. Two coders independently classified each complaining behavior as voice, third-party action, or private action and rated each politeness response on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 represented very impolite and 7 represented very polite. The agreement rates for the two procedures were 85.6 and 27.7 percent respectively. The vast difference between these two agreement rates for the two procedures was 85.6 and 27.7 percent respectively. The vast difference between these two agreement rates is not unexpected given that the first required classification based on an established typology and the second required selection of a score on a semantic differential scale.

Following the classification procedure, the coders reconciled their differences for the complaining behaviors. The researcher then added up the number of voiced complaints, third-party complaints, and private complaints for each subject. These scores were then each divided by the total number of complaints for a given subject. The rationale for such weighting of responses was that an individual who wrote down a voiced complaint as his only behavior uses voice more consistently than an individual who wrote down one voiced complaint among two or more behaviors.

Initially, the politeness scores were averaged across both behaviors and coders in order to obtain one score for each subject. As a result of this procedure, however, subjects exhibited little variance in their politeness scores with most subjects scoring between 3 and 4. This seems to be a result of the fact that the same subject often listed behaviors classified by the coders as very polite as well as behaviors classified as very impolite. In most cases, it seemed highly unlikely that an individual would exhibit such contrasting behaviors in the same scenario. Based on these results, it is suspected that subjects attempted to use all of the space provided to answer the question despite the fact that they were told to list “up to five” behaviors. Although this may have occurred with the complaining behaviors as well, subjects appeared to be more consistent in those responses than in those pertaining to politeness.

In order to increase variance and make use of this data, all scores for behaviors listed after the first were discarded. The rationale behind this decision was that in formulating a response to the question, a subject’s most common behavior would be most salient and would therefore most likely be listed first. This procedure resulted in wider distribution with scores for each subject ranging from 1.5 to 7 with a mean of 3.59 when averaged across the two coders.

Measure of discriminant validity
One of two versions of the shortened social desirability scale tested by Strahan and Gerbasi (1972) was included in order to assess the discriminant validity of the newly developed politeness scale. Low correlations between the politeness scale and the social desirability scale are particularly important in order to be sure that subjects respond based on their own behaviors and not according to what they think society expects from them.

Because it was previously developed and tested in the literature (Strahan and Gerbasi, 1972), the ten-item social desirability scale was submitted to a confirmatory factor analysis. However, the previously identified one factor model (Strahan and Gerbasi, 1972) did not fit the data based on a $x^2$ test ($x^2 = 46.127$, $df = 35$, $p > x^2 = 0.10$). Given the poor fit, the data was reanalyzed using exploratory factor analysis and the scale purified following the iterative process described earlier. The final social desirability scale contained five items loading on a single factor. The factor loadings, however, were low ranging from 0.37 to 0.51. Consistent with the low loadings, reliability was a low 0.58.

The results for this scale are certainly disappointing, but are not necessarily inconsistent with those obtained by Strahan and Gerbasi (1972). The researchers collected data from four samples using the ten-item social desirability scale tested here. Reliabilities across samples varied widely from 0.49 to 0.75 and the range of absolute loadings ranged from 0.28 to 0.54 with a mean of 0.42. Given this history, the unpurified and certainly the purified scale analyzed here performed fairly well.

Additional measures
The survey included standard demographic questions such as sex and age as well as demographic questions particularly relevant to perceptions of politeness such as country-of-origin and language usually spoken at home. These latter questions were included based on studies showing that culture and the

Table II Politeness scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>When making a request, I am as direct as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>It’s OK for people to be forceful in order to get their way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>I am comfortable asking people whom I barely know personal questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>I feel free to express my opinion when I disagree with someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>I am forceful in order to get my way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>If asked whether or not I like something, I will frankly say if I do not like it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: NP = Negative politeness; PP = Positive politeness; All items are reverse-scaled
Assessment of validity
Proper scale development requires an assessment of convergent validity – as measured by the correlation coefficient between different methods on the same trait – and discriminant validity – as measured by the same method on different traits (Peter, 1981). Although there are no generally accepted correlation coefficient values for determining validity, those between different methods on the same trait (convergent validity) must be higher than those between the same method on different traits (discriminant validity) in order for a measure to be considered valid (Churchill, 1979).

The correlation coefficients between the different methods on the same trait are $r = 0.34$ (politeness scale and politeness open response) and $r = 0.10$ (complaining behavior scale and complaining behavior open response). Given that the coefficient between the two complaining behavior measures ($r = 0.10$) is extremely low, it fails to provide evidence of convergent validity for that trait[1]. However, in contrast, the correlation between the two politeness measures is quite high when one considers that the open format asked for verbal and non-verbal behaviors whereas the scale measured only verbal behavior. Additionally, the coefficient between the two politeness measures ($r = 0.34$) is higher than that between the politeness and social desirability scales ($r = 0.21$)[2] as can be expected from measures intended to provide evidence of convergent validity and discriminant validity respectively. The negative coefficient between the politeness and social desirability scales is important because it suggests that subjects did not report that they engage in polite behavior just because it may be socially desirable.

It is interesting to note that at $r = -0.34$, the absolute value of the correlation between the politeness and complaining behavior scale is the same as the correlation between the politeness measures. Although one might expect this value to be smaller than the correlation coefficient intended to provide convergent validity, it suggests that the politeness scale does demonstrate nomological validity. To make this determination and test the hypotheses posited earlier, the purified complaining behavior scale was divided into three subscales (voice, third-party actions, and private actions) for the purposes of hypothesis testing.

Results

$H1$ posits a negative relationship between politeness and complaining behavior. The correlation between politeness and complaining behavior was $r = -0.34$ ($p < 0.05$), supporting this hypothesis. $H2$, which posits a negative relationship between politeness and voiced complaints, was also supported ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.005$). However, $H3$, which posits a negative relationship between politeness and third-party actions, was not supported. More specifically, the data provided directional support for the hypothesis but the relationship between politeness and third-party actions was not statistically significant ($r = -0.20$, $p = 0.19$), perhaps due to low sample size. $H4$ was also not supported. This hypothesis states that the tendency to be polite is uncorrelated with private action complaining behavior. In contrast, the data suggest that politeness and private action behavior are negatively correlated ($r = -0.27$, $p < 0.05$).

$H5$ posits that as politeness increases, consumers will be more likely to use private actions most often, followed by third party actions, and then voice. To test this hypothesis, respondents were divided into two groups based on a median split of politeness scores. Respondents whose scores exceeded the median were classified as "polite" and those whose scores fell below the median score were classified as "impolite." Means for each group reveal that both polite and impolite consumers are most likely to use private action (mean = 10.6 for polite, mean = 11.3 for impolite), followed by third party action (mean = 9.4 for polite, mean = 10.2 for impolite), and then voice (mean = 8.0 for polite, mean = 9.1 for impolite). However, only the difference in the use of voice and private action was statistically significant within each group ($t = -2.6$, $p < 0.01$ for impolite; $t = -4.3$, $p < 0.0005$ for polite). A comparison of mean scores across groups indicates that impolite respondents are more likely than polite respondents to use voice ($t = 2.8$, $p < 0.01$) and marginally more likely to use private action ($t = 1.8$, $p = 0.09$). However, no difference exists in their likelihood of using third-party actions ($t = 1.0$, $p = 0.31$). Thus, the data does support differences in complaining behavior depending on politeness level although not in a way entirely consistent with the hypothesized effect.

Study 2

The purpose of study 2 was to replicate the results of study 1 with a larger and more diverse sample. The study also served to further test the reliability of the politeness scale.

Methodology

A total of 221 adults (44 percent male, 56 percent female) responded to a self-administered questionnaire in exchange for $2.00 either while waiting for a train at a commuter rail station or dining at a nearby cafe. Ages ranged from 15 to 62 with a mean of 32.7. Respondents were highly educated (54.2 percent of respondents held at least a college degree and 19.2 percent completed graduate school) and held a wide variety of professional positions. A total of 67.8 percent of respondents reported a household income over $100,000.

Politeness scale

Politeness was measured using the six-item scale developed and tested in study 1. Reliability of the unidimensional politeness scale was 0.81.

Complaining behavior

As in study 1, factor analysis of the complaining behavior data yielded an uninterpretable loading pattern. The same procedure as in study 1 was used to purify the scale. The final scale contained eight items with a reliability of 0.82. The reliabilities of the voice, third-party, and private action subscales were 0.71, 0.77, and 0.76 respectively.

Results

The correlation between politeness and complaining behavior was $r = -0.61$ ($p < 0.0001$), supporting $H1$. $H2$, which posits a negative relationship between politeness and voice, was also supported ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.0001$). Similarly, $H3$, which posits a negative relationship between politeness and
third party action was supported ($p = -0.51$, $p < 0.0001$). However contrary to $H4$, politeness and private action were negatively correlated ($p = -0.36$, $p < 0.0001$).

$H5$ posits that as politeness increases, consumers will be likely to use private actions most often, followed by third party actions, and then voice. Respondents indicated being most likely to use private action (mean = 14.9 for polite, mean = 17.0 for impolite), followed by voice (mean = 12.1 for polite, mean = 15.8 for impolite) and then third-party action (mean = 6.4 for polite, mean = 9.2 for impolite). The differences between these means within the polite and impolite groups were all statistically significant (see Table III).

A comparison of mean scores across groups indicates that both polite and impolite respondents are more likely to use voice (mean = 15.8 for impolite, 12.1 for polite, $t = 7.8$, $p < 0.0001$), third party action (mean = 9.2 for impolite, mean = 6.4 for polite, $t = 6.9$, $p < 0.0001$) and private action (mean = 17.0 for impolite, mean = 14.9 for polite, $t = 4.1$, $p < 0.0001$).

**General discussion**

The results of two studies indicate a negative relationship between politeness and complaining behavior. However, one detail of this relationship was unexpected: the negative relationship between politeness and private action. This finding suggests that consumers may perceive private actions as potentially insulting to a service provider. Whereas a consumer engaging in private action may prevent direct confrontation with the service provider, private action may result in such confrontation down the road. If, for example, a consumer decides not to use a particular service provider again, that service provider may call or write to the consumer asking why he has not been in and encouraging a return visit. In this case, the interaction may be nearly as direct as in the voice scenario.

The choice of complaining behavior depends, at least in part, on the politeness of the consumer. Impolite consumers are more likely than polite consumers to use voice. However, study 1 suggests that polite and impolite consumers appear equally likely to use third-party actions. To the degree that companies prefer to hear complaints directly and not have outside parties (e.g. attorneys, the Better Business Bureau) involved, this is problematic. More specifically, a company may have an opportunity to remedy a dissatisfying experience for an impolite consumer before he resorts to third-party actions. However, no such opportunity may exist with the polite consumer since he is less likely to voice the complaint but just as likely to resort to contact a third party. Fortunately, study 2 suggests that this is not the case, that impolite consumers are more likely to use third party action. The difference between the two studies is likely due to the samples used. For college students who in most cases have only recently started to make major purchase decisions on their own, the question of whether or not they would use a third party may be a theoretical one. The wider population of adults represented by the study 2 sample presumably drew on a longer and fuller personal consumer history when accessing their likely behavior.

Of more concern, perhaps, is the finding that consumers, both polite and impolite, are more likely to engage in private action than they are to voice their complaints. Given that voice offers managers an opportunity to identify and then remedy problems, they should look for ways to encourage consumers to engage in this behavior. A hotel front desk clerk asking upon checkout if everything was satisfactory, however, will not create an incentive, particularly for the polite consumer. Rather, managers must create incentives that are not face-threatening. Customer satisfaction surveys are certainly a step in the right direction, but these need to be designed and administered with care. An optional survey to be completed at a hotel, for example, may not provide much of an incentive, particularly if the guest is expected to hand it directly to a person. The design of some satisfaction surveys may also be insufficient for encouraging voice. Pointed questions may more successfully elicit consumer complaints than general satisfaction questions, particularly if consumers do not want to lie or be dishonest.

Managers may also consider using positive politeness as a means for soliciting complaints. As described earlier, positive politeness expresses an appreciation of the other person's wants and in doing so conveys a sense of similarity and solidarity. A service provider may, for example, make a point to recognize the possibility of dissatisfaction, or of a less-than-perfect experience, and a desire to minimize such incidences. Consumers may view this approach as offering a genuine invitation for them to voice their complaints. Of course, this approach may also invite consumers to focus on minor imperfections that did not concern them until asked. As always, managers will have to work hard to identify those voiced complaints with potential to affect profitability and then act accordingly.

**Directions for further research**

It should be pointed out that although polite consumers appear less likely to voice complaints than impolite consumers, this does not mean that they never do so. In future studies, researchers may consider examining the conditions under which polite consumers do and do not voice complaints. They may be more or less likely depending on, for example, the type of complaint and/or the service provider's system for handling complaints. Such research would be helpful for managers who seek to address their customers' complaints before those customers take outside action.

In addition to exploring the managerial issues related to politeness and complaining behavior, future researchers may also seek to address some of the theoretical and methodological limitations of the current study. Although an attempt was made to expand the definition of politeness to include non-verbal as well as verbal behavior, all the items in the purified politeness scale relate to the (in)direct nature of utterances. Thus, researchers may seek to further develop this scale by adding more items pertaining to this aspect of verbal behavior. Moreover, researchers may conduct further tests to demonstrate the predictive validity of the politeness scale.

**Table III** Difference between means for polite and impolite groups (polite, impolite)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice vs third-party</td>
<td>13.0**, 14.8***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice vs private</td>
<td>5.3**, 2.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-party vs private</td>
<td>16.4**, 19.3***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, researchers may consider investigating the possibility of a relationship between politeness and the opposite of consumer complaining behavior, that is, consumer complimenting behavior. As Kraft and Martin (2001) point out, consumer compliments constitute extremely valuable feedback for a company, but have received little attention in the marketing literature. A relationship between politeness and complimenting behavior makes sense, particularly given that complimenting behavior is routed in linguistics (Payne et al., 2002) and is subject to social norms (Kraft and Martin, 2001). The politeness scale developed and tested here can be used in empirical studies designed to test such a relationship.

Conclusion

These studies demonstrate the relationship between consumer politeness and complaining behavior. As such, they serve to identify and isolate one of the challenges managers face in addressing consumer complaints across a variety of service industries.

Notes

1 As mentioned earlier, it appeared that subjects did not necessarily limit their responses to what they themselves would say or do but tried to fill the space provided. An attempt to correct this problem was made by only counting the first response on the politeness open response and by weighting the complaining behavior responses. The tremendous difference between the correlation for the politeness measures and the complaining behavior measures may be due to the fact that despite the corrections, all of a subject’s responses were incorporated into the complimenting behavior score on the open format whereas this was not the case for the politeness score.

2 Given the low reliability of the social desirability scale, all correlation coefficients including this scale are corrected for attenuation.

References


Lakoff, R. (1973), “The logic of politeness; or minding your Ps and Qs”, Papers from the 9th Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society, Chicago, IL, pp. 292-305.


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**Executive summary and implications for managers and executives**

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

**Types of complaining behavior**

Companies have become increasingly interested in hearing from their customers – particularly the dissatisfied ones. Complaints can be by voice, private actions or third-party actions. Voice refers to complaining behavior directed toward the offending party. A customer who confronts a retailer or manufacturer – whether in person, by writing or by telephone – would be exhibiting voice. Third-party action refers to complaints expressed to an external party not directly involved with the offending service provider but who may have some authority or influence over it. Consumers who contact consumer protection agencies, lawyers or newspapers as a result of a dissatisfying experience with a retailer or service provider are taking third-party actions. Private action refers to behavior exhibited within a customer’s own social circle. This can range from warning friends and families not to use that service provider to deciding not to purchase from there again.

**The effect of politeness on complaining behavior**

Not all disgruntled customers complain, so the number of complaints received by a company may not always be a good measure of customer satisfaction. Lerman investigates, through two studies, whether politeness prevents some customers from making a complaint. The author finds that the more polite people are, the less likely they are to complain. The most polite people are least likely to use the voice method of making a complaint, perhaps because this requires direct confrontation with the service provider. Customers, both polite and impolite, are more likely to engage in private action than they are to voice their complaints. While the first of the author’s studies suggests that polite and impolite consumers appear equally likely to use third-party actions, the results of the second study indicate that impolite customers are more likely than polite ones to use third-party actions. The difference may be because of the different samples used in the two studies. The first used college students who, in most cases, have only recently started to make
major purchase decisions on their own. The second used a wider population of adults, who presumably have a longer and fuller history as a consumer on which to draw.

**How managers should react**
Managers should look for ways to encourage customers to complain by voice, because this helps managers to identify and remedy problems. Simply having a front-desk clerk ask an hotel guest who is checking out whether everything was satisfactory is unlikely to be much of an incentive, particularly for a polite customer. Carefully designed customer-satisfaction surveys may be better. These should contain pointed questions rather than questions about general satisfaction. And managers should not expect the guest to hand the completed form directly to a staff member.

Managers who express an appreciation of a client’s wants can convey a sense of similarity and solidarity. Managers may therefore decide to make a point of recognizing the possibility of the guest’s dissatisfaction – of a less-than-perfect experience – and showing a desire to minimize the risks of future guests being dissatisfied. Guests may view such an approach as offering a genuine invitation for them to voice their complaints. But this approach may also encourage customers to focus on minor imperfections that did not concern them until they were asked. Managers need to work hard to identify the voiced complaints that could affect profitability, and act accordingly.

*(A précis of the article “Consumer politeness and complaining behavior”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)*