Complaints are a firm's best friend

Sophie Larivet[a]* and François Brouard[b]

[a]*Department of Marketing, Ecole Superieure du Commerce Exterieur (ESCE), Pôle Universitaire Léonard de Vinci, Paris La Défense cedex, 92916, France;* [b]*Sprott School of Business, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, 824 Dunton Tower, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5B6, Canada*

The strategic intelligence literature includes many studies on the use of sales forces and exhibitions; however, customer complaints are generally sidestepped in the strategic intelligence context. This article takes a theoretical approach to the interaction between strategic intelligence and complaint management. From our literature review, we draw an exploratory model of the link between the two processes and emphasize the most important complaint handling initiatives for strategic intelligence, both for its gathering and protection aspects. An analytical presentation of the intelligence that can be collected from complaints is proposed. The research should be helpful to managers who want to understand better or design a complaint management system that is 'strategic intelligence oriented'.

Keywords: strategic intelligence; marketing intelligence; complaint management

Introduction

Managers can be deterred from implementing a strategic intelligence (SI) system because they fear its cost and presumed complexity. While strategic intelligence can in fact have a sophisticated organizational shape (an Intelligence Head Office, for instance), companies can also use existing informational practices to contribute to an intelligence system. Thus much of the literature stresses that a great deal of information already exists within companies and is simply not circulated. For example, salespersons are continually collecting marketing intelligence as a by-product of their work, but many of them fail to pass on the intelligence. Their managers need to motivate them and develop a positive attitude towards strategic intelligence in order to make them play the game (Le Bon, 2006). Yet strategic intelligence development can rely on what is already available in the firm (Brouard, 2007) and simply requires the integration of independent marketing information techniques (Fleisher, Wright, & Allard, 2008).

In order to introduce or expand strategic intelligence culture into existing organizational systems, it is important to give managers some food for thought. After all, most firms do not have to build a strategic intelligence system from scratch. The strategic intelligence literature includes studies about the use of sales forces (Le Bon, 2006) or exhibitions (Calof & Fox, 2003) for strategic intelligence purposes, but customers' complaints are generally ignored. This article tries to fill in this gap by studying interactions between complaint management and strategic intelligence. In addition to this central and theoretical objective, this research

*Corresponding author. Email: sophie.larivet@esce.fr

encourages the use of marketing information processes to develop or improve strategic intelligence systems.

The outline of the article is as follows. First, fundamental concepts are defined. The next section explains the contributions of complaint management to strategic intelligence and presents the interactions of both concepts in a conceptual model. The key elements of complaint handling for strategic intelligence are then detailed. A section discussing some findings and presenting managerial implications follows. Future research is suggested in the conclusion.

Definitions of fundamental concepts

The fundamental concepts of the article are strategic intelligence and complaint management.

Strategic intelligence

Strategic intelligence is both a process and an output. It is the output of the informational process by which an organization stays attuned to its environment in order to make strategic decisions. Strategic intelligence can be divided into four more specific types of intelligence (Brouard, 2000; Daft & Weick, 1984; Jennings & Lumpkin, 1992).

- Competitive Intelligence is related to actual and potential competitors.
- Technological intelligence involves the technological dimension of an organization's products, services or processes.
- Commercial intelligence is about customers or prospects (marketing intelligence) and suppliers.
- Societal intelligence is concerned with all other elements, including demographic, economic, socio-cultural and political factors.

Strategic intelligence is also another name for the global informational process, which can be divided into two sub-cycles: the gathering cycle and the protection cycle (see Figure 1).

The gathering cycle has four phases: planning; collection; analysis; and dissemination (Ghoshal & Westney, 1991; Miller, 2000; Peyrot, Childs, van Doren, & Allen, 2002). In the planning phase, the organization identifies the intelligence needs of its management team.
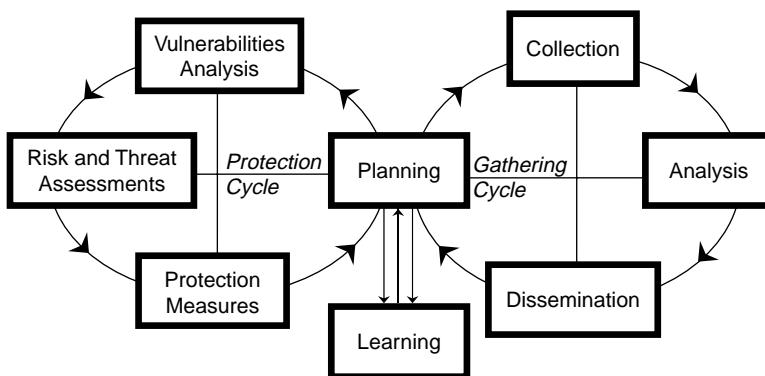

Figure 1.   Intelligence cycle.

Collection refers to the acquisition of relevant data. Analysis creates information by linking data together and identifying patterns and trends, while the dissemination phase consists of transmitting results to the decision makers.

More and more authors now also include protection activities in SI practices (Francq, 2001; Larivet, 2006; Nolan & Quinn, 2000). During the planning phase of this cycle, organizations identify critical assets and determine their protection requirements, since they realize that it is impossible and costly to protect everything. Vulnerability analysis assesses the weaknesses that may exist in relation to protection needs, while risk and threat assessments estimate the potential effects of vulnerabilities on organizational activities and serve as a basis for designing safety and security measures. Protection measures are designed to safeguard information and intangible assets (knowledge, databases, reputation, image …) from others (competitors, hackers, etc.) or from accidents (fire, etc.). Both the gathering and the protection cycle include a learning phase (Figure 1) to evaluate past actions and react accordingly for the future.

While some academic research in SI focuses on various marketing information sources, no article in this field concentrates on complaints even though marketing specialists recognize that complaints are a source of intelligence.

Complaints and complaint management

Complaint management is a widely studied subject in the marketing literature (Harris & Ogbonna, 2010; Orsingher, Valentini, & de Angelis, 2010). The objective of this section is not to present an exhaustive literature review but to review some essential characteristics of complaint management in order to present our model and explain how complaint management can be useful in strategic intelligence.

Complaints

A customer complaint can be defined as a customer's protest to a firm with the goal of obtaining an exchange, refund or apology (Singh & Widing, 1991). It is a form of negative feedback from the customer (Bell, Mengüç, & Stefani, 2004), and can be considered reasonable or unreasonable (McCole, 2004). Different customers will have different objectives in their complaints. Some may look for a redress or recovery action; some may only want to comment on a situation.

Customer reaction can be divided into two phases. The initial customer reaction follows a business transaction for a product/service. The subsequent actions or customer reaction follows the business' reaction.

The first (initial) reaction can be analysed using Hirschman's (1970) typology. Initial dissatisfaction can be divided into two main categories: exit and voice (Andreassen, 1999; Maute & Forrester, 1993). The exit response is probably the worst for the organization because customers will stop buying the product/service and change their patronage. They could also switch brands or reduce their consumption. This article focuses more on voice response, of which complaint is the main form. This response can be directed to the organization, but also to friends and consumer organizations. These third-party complaints could bring the dispute into the legal system or to a public forum by organizing a boycott or setting up a protest website (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). By complaining, however, the customer offers another chance to the organization. In addition to exit and voice, Hirschman's typology also includes the loyalty response, seen as a passive response (Maute & Forrester, 1993). This could be viewed as a wait-and-see approach. The customer 'does nothing', making this kind of reaction less important for this study.

The second customer reaction depends on the customer's satisfaction with the recovery reaction. It can increase the level of complaint and provide additional information for strategic intelligence purposes (Voorhees & Brady, 2005).

Complaint management

According to Fornell and Wernerfelt (1988) and Fornell and Westbrook (1979), complaint management is much more than complaint handling. The process by which a company will give (or not) compensation to unsatisfied customers. Complaint management is also about facilitating complaint expression and its dissemination within the firm (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1988).

Resistance to complaint management comes in many forms (Détrie, 2007): customers are viewed as whiners, complaints are seen as denunciations, suppliers are incriminated and so on. Negative reactions are not what a firm prefers to hear. However, many studies show that there can be a positive impact from complaint management. For example, complaint management can:

- increase consumer satisfaction, product evaluation and purchase likelihood by allowing customers to vent their dissatisfaction (Kowalski, 1996; Nyer, 2000);
- heighten the customer retention rate (Ang & Buttle, 2006; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998);
- limit the spread of potentially damaging negative word-of-mouth information (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Blodgett, Granbois, & Walters, 1993);
- enhance the likelihood of repurchase (Gilly, 1987);
- have a positive impact on customer loyalty (Andreassen, 1999).

Thus complaint management's contribution to a company's results can follow different paths. Most of the time, authors highlight this one: complaint management can increase satisfaction, thus can have a positive impact on loyalty, and thus can improve profitability, in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) perspective. But another path has to be explored: complaint management can contribute to strategic intelligence, and thus to competitive advantage. This article focuses on the first step of this route (complaint management contributions to strategic intelligence).

Contributions of complaints and complaint handling to strategic intelligence

Collecting intelligence from complaints

Intelligence from complaints is a source of strategic opportunity (Harari, 1992). Fornell (2007) suggests that complaints should be encouraged in order to extract more information from customers. Most articles only take into account the contribution of complaints to the clientele dimension of commercial intelligence, also known as customer or marketing intelligence (Xu & Kaye, 1995). However, data from customers do not only contain customer intelligence, in the strict sense of the word. For example, a business might collect information about suppliers' technology and rates, about competitors' rates and about new regulation using complaints (Larivet & Brouard, 2007). Albrecht (2000) and Gordon (2002) give several examples of potential intelligence that could be gathered from complaints. Table 1 summarizes the different kinds of information that can be found in complaints: not only marketing intelligence, but also competitive, technological or societal intelligence.

Table 1. Examples of strategic intelligence gathered from complaints.

Technological	New technology on the market, default in technology, new technology or production process by a competitor, new technology or material of a supplier, etc.
Competitive	Product/service by competitors, comparison with competitors' product/service; customers' perception of the organization, customers' perception of competitors, change in competitors' rates, etc.
Commercial	Reasons for customers' satisfaction/dissatisfaction, failure examples, customers' expectations, customers' needs, customers' requirements, customers' service evaluation, other suppliers of the customer, level of customer loyalty, customers' experience, quality of relationship, reasons for brand preferences, possible solutions to a problem, complaint rate and frequency, level of return, history of some transactions, types of information sought, preferred mode of entry for complaints, pricing sensibility, preferred pricing structure, billing problems, satisfaction with resolution and business reaction, future purchase timing, explanations on account receivables, problem with a salesperson/distributor, retention rate, etc.
Societal	Customers' needs by age group or location, new trends, protest websites, protest organizations, new regulation, etc.

Protecting the reputation of the company

As already mentioned, strategic intelligence includes protection measures. In a governmental or military context, intelligence services not only collect, analyse and disseminate information, but they also try to protect the knowledge of the country (strategic technologies for instance). In a competitive perspective, it is logical for a firm to gather intelligence about its competitors or its environment, but it is also logical to try to prevent competitors from doing so: competitive advantage stems from informational asymmetry.

The protection scope varies depending on authors. The traditional approach concentrates on information assets that could be stolen or discovered by the competitors. A broader view includes perception management (Francq, 2001; Harbulot, Moinet, & Lucas, 2002). Applied to private firms, perception management can be considered as legal actions designed to affect perceptions of the image, identity or reputation of an organization (Elsbach, 2006). Reputation is an intangible asset that needs to be protected, not only from competitors, but also from dissatisfied customers. It belongs in the scope of the strategic intelligence protection process.

Quite recently, the French cable operator Noos was unable to respond to the very numerous complaints of its customers. It chose to change its name following such a precipitous fall in reputation that returning to the status quo was unthinkable (Aguila, 2007). This example recalls the importance of the quality of complaint handling in protecting reputation: dissatisfied complainants have higher levels of brand loyalty than non-complainants, but only if the complaint management system ends up giving them satisfaction (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1988).

When a negative rumour spreads (whether or not it is based on truth), the complaint handling system will be in the firing line and will have to answer questions or reassure worried customers. Procter & Gamble has been receiving mail related to its relationship with Satan for years after the birth of the rumour (Kimmel, 2004). The complaint handling process provides the opportunity to prevent or fight rumours and to respond to false (or true) accusations and helps limit the spread of negative word of mouth (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Blodgett et al., 1993).

Patents are traditional tools of strategic intelligence that help to protect the knowledge of a company. Efficient complaint handling and management can help protect a brand or a

reputation. Fornell and Wernerfelt (1988) call complaint management defensive marketing. Thus it is also a contribution to the defensive cycle of strategic intelligence.

Process interaction

As explained above, complaint management interacts with both the gathering and protection cycles of strategic intelligence. In Figure 2, a conceptual and exploratory model sketches the link between the complaint process and strategic intelligence. We define the complaint process as the cycle of a complaint from the customer's initial reaction to his or her secondary reaction. More details about this process are given in the next section, but preliminary explanations of Figure 2 are needed now.

As shown in Figure 2, a transaction (product or service) occurs between the customer and the business that generates a customer reaction. Some of the factors that affect customer behaviour (customer characteristics, context and customer attitudes) will not be developed here because they are not directly related to the interaction between the complaint process and strategic intelligence.

The customer reaction itself can be classified into three main categories: positive (compliments, positive word of mouth, commitment), neutral (do nothing, request information) or negative. When his reaction is negative, the customer may voice a complaint. The voicing of the complaint is the first step of a cyclical complaint process, about which further explanations will be provided in the next section and in Figure 3. The complaint should generate a business reaction, which is the reaction of both the organization itself and the employee(s) in contact with the customer. Organization reaction and employee reaction are impacted by various factors such as characteristics, context and attitudes. Only the most important factors are presented in the following paragraphs.

Employees' perceptions have an impact on customer behaviour and perception of justice (Homburg & Stock, 2004; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003). The literature has classified employees' attitude towards the customer into avoidance, collaboration, accommodation and
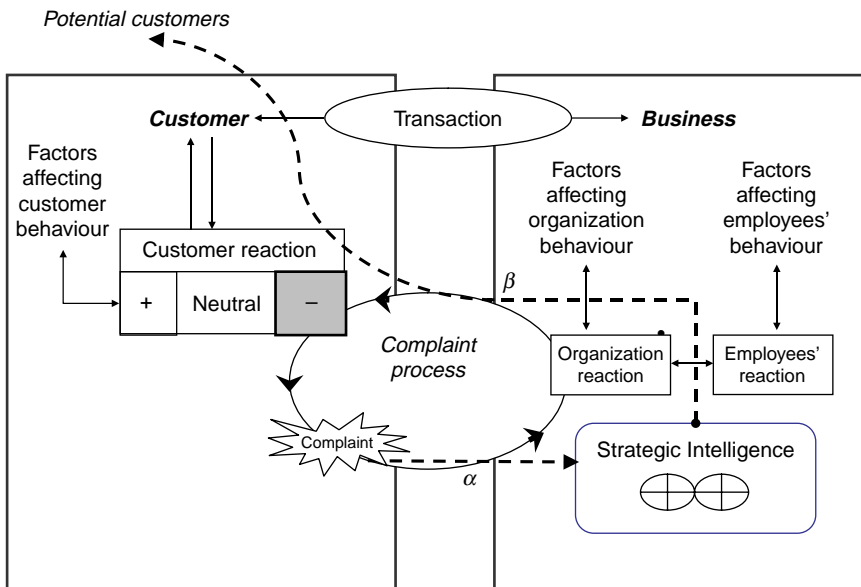

Figure 2.   Customer complaints and strategic intelligence model.

competition (Bell & Luddington, 2006; Bell et al., 2004; Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994). Of course, some employee attitudes are useful for efficient complaint management – reliability, promptness, experience with complaints and seeking behaviour.

Business characteristics, attitude and context are also very important for complaint management. In particular, professional standards, consumer associations, the level of competition, human resources training, managerial style, reputation sensibility and costs of compensation will make the business more or less attentive to its complaint management.

Those elements are the standard components cited in complaints literature. The model also depicts the strategic intelligence process with its two sub-cycles, both of which interact with the complaint management system.

Gathering cycle and complaint process

In Figure 2, a dotted arrow (named α) moves from the complaint process to the strategic intelligence process. It is the symbol for the information flow that, coming from complaint handling, feeds the gathering cycle. The complaint handling system will determine how intelligence enters the firm. The complaint management policy will establish the way a complaint is analysed and circulated, which makes it very important to be aware that complaints intelligence is useful for other purposes than increasing customer satisfaction. All dissemination solutions are possible, from very informal systems in small businesses (Larivet, 2009) to interrelated databases and search engines in large corporations.

Protection cycle and complaint process

A second dotted arrow (named β) goes from strategic intelligence to the customer, through the complaint process. The arrow depicts the protective effects of a good complaint management on the firm's image and reputation. The information and/or compensation given to an unsatisfied customer will help prevent or limit any negative impacts of the customer's dissatisfaction (secondary reaction). If there is no complaint management system, or if the customer sees the company's reaction as inappropriate, there is a potential danger of negative word of mouth or of public action (through a consumer association, for instance). Both can damage the firm's reputation and brand image.

Because complaint management is a process that connects a firm with its environment (like sales do, for example), it is an area where information flows inside and outside the company. It appears that both components of strategic intelligence can rely on complaint management. Complaint management is already known for its customer knowledge function, but it is obvious that it can also have a larger strategic intelligence function. In order to describe better the variables that are important for its implementation or improvement (in a strategic intelligence perspective), we now present a more comprehensive model of the complaint process.

Key elements of the complaint process for strategic intelligence

Complaining behaviour is a dynamic and complex process (Blodgett et al., 1993). Since many factors affect stakeholders' reactions, Figure 3 identifies the features of our complaint process model. The model consists of a description of the customer complaint route and of some handling initiatives. Its design incorporates ideas from many authors (Andreassen, 2000; Bell & Luddington, 2006; Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Blodgett, Wakefield, & Barnes, 1995; Estelami, 2000; Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987, 1988; Maxham
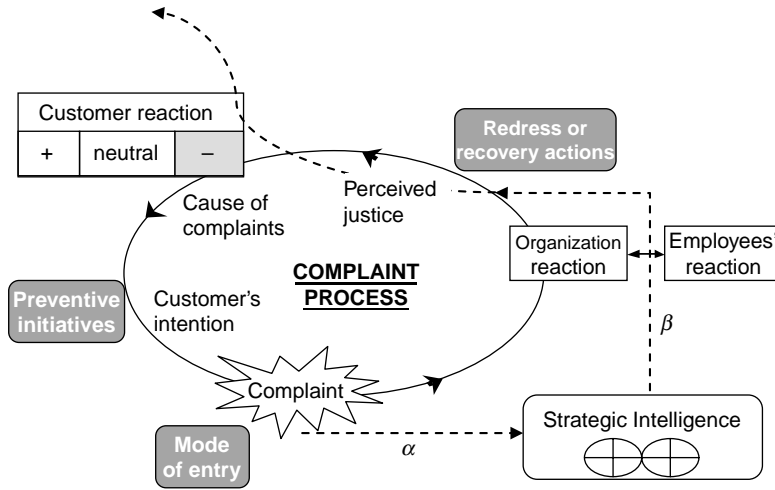
Figure 3.   Complaint process.

& Netemeyer, 2002; McCole, 2004; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006; Santos & Boote, 2003; Singh, 1988; Singh & Widing, 1991, Singh & Wilkes, 1996; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Szymanski & Henard, 2001; Tax et al., 1998; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993).

Our complaint process distinguishes two sets of concepts. The first series (inside the circle) depicts some steps of customer complaining behaviour. The second series (outside the circle) depicts some handling initiatives that could be of importance in a strategic intelligence perspective.

The first series includes concepts ranging from the cause of complaints to perceived justice.

Cause of complaints

The major reasons for complaints are core product or service failure, billing, scheduling, slow service, pricing, inappropriate employee behaviour, consumer did not like product anymore, product did not fit, product not compatible, delivery problem, poor repair work, product damaged in repair or poor product design (Estelami, 2000). Having a reason to complain is not sufficient to set a customer in motion. He or she might not have the intention to complain.

Customer's intention to complain

Customer complaint intention is a major variable in complaining behaviour and depends on factors such as perceived value, prior experience of complaining, attitude towards complaining or culture (Kim, Kim, Im, & Shin, 2003; Liu & McClure, 2001; Maute & Forrester, 1993; Sharma, Marshall, Reday, & Na, 2010; Singh, 1988; Voorhees & Brady, 2005). If a customer indeed complains, he or she will have a secondary reaction to the way his or her complaint was handled. At this stage, the perceived justice related to the business and employees' reaction is decisive (Prim-Allaz & Sabadie, 2005; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999).

Perceived justice

The perceived justice concept can be divided into three dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002; McCole, 2004; Tax et al., 1998). All refer to fairness. Distributive justice refers to the fairness of the remedy in the exchange (outcomes). Procedural justice refers to the fairness of the procedures and policies used (decision-making procedures). Interactional justice refers to how fairly a customer is treated during the complaint process (interpersonal behaviour).

The second group of variables (inside the circle) in Figure 3 is related to handling measures taken by the organization.

Preventive initiatives

Preventive initiatives help preventing failures or set in place the basis to handle complaints. Examples are quality control, customer service policies, codes of conduct, refunds, return and exchange policies, guarantees, training activities, benchmarking, internal audit and product trial.

Mode of entry

The mode of entry for complaints varies greatly in terms of points of entry and formats. Some complaints are solicited and others are voluntary. Some are written and others are oral. Modes of entry include front-line employees, intermediaries, managers, third-party recipients of complaints, complaint cards, suggestion cards, satisfaction cards, website questionnaires, surveys, personal letters, email, oral comments requested and informal oral comments (Mattila, 2004; Robertson & Shaw, 2006; Voss & Gruber, 2005). Depending on the mode of entry, strategic intelligence collection might be easier or harder. For example, written satisfaction cards are easier to process systematically, compared to informal oral comments. Different industries have standard practices to solicit and handle complaints, like the praise and assessment cards in the hospitality industry (Jones, McCleary, & Lepisto, 2002; Voss & Gruber, 2005).

Redress/recovery actions

Following a complaint, businesses will react and will or will not offer something to the complainant. Kelley, Hoffman and Davis (1993) identify 12 redress/recovery strategies: discount for problems or inconvenience, correction (e.g. repair, adequate information), manager/employee intervention, correction plus (compensation added to correction), replacement, apology (oral/written), refund, customer initiated correction, business credit, unsatisfactory correction, failure escalation and 'nothing'. The last three strategies are considered unacceptable recovery strategies and should not be used when designing a complaint handling process.

Those actions are important because effective service recovery can have a positive impact on consumer trust and commitment (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Tax et al., 1998). Defensive marketing with compensation could be seen as more cost effective than advertising (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1988), which is of importance in a perception management perspective. Without a proper response, organizations may create additional customer dissatisfaction (Goodwin & Ross, 1993). In cases of conflict and the absence of resolution, the public court system could be used by the customer. Dissatisfaction can be

voiced by other means (consumer associations, blogs, reviews and other new media techniques).

For strategic intelligence, the mode of entry and recovery actions are very important. First, in order to have an efficient gathering cycle, the complaint process has to be able to incorporate all complaints, no matter which form they take (mode of entry). Second, the type of recovery action chosen by the company influences the perceived justice (by the customer) and thus his or her future talk about the brand or the firm, which could reach other customers or prospects. In a perception management perspective, the message delivered to the customer at this moment of the complaint handling process is crucial. A strategic intelligence culture could help complaint managers to be more aware of their role in influencing customers' opinion and word of mouth.

Discussion and managerial implications

Complaints are 'weak signals'

Two interesting questions about complaints as a source for actionable intelligence are: are complaints typical enough of what happens to consumers to be considered? Are they 'important' enough to be processed in a strategic intelligence system? Indeed, in the field of mass consumption products, only 4% of dissatisfied customers who have bought packaged goods or other small ticket items complain to the producer. For large ticket items, the percentage varies from 5 to 10% (Goodman, 1999). As stated by Sharma et al. (2010), complainers and non-complainers have different characteristics, which make the second ones not fully representative of customers in general. Some rare customers, sometimes called jaycustomers, deliberately act in an abusive manner (Harris & Reynolds, 2004). As mentioned by Moyer (1984), complaint handling systems must be complemented by other intelligence gathering instruments to avoid the bias of complainers (exaggerations, for instance).

However, according to Ansoff's (1975) theory of weak signals, whether complainers or complaints are representative or not is not that important. Something new or unusual in a complaint might be a sign of a strategic surprise, an unfamiliar, sudden and urgent event (Ansoff, 1975). In a strategic intelligence perspective, such a signal in a complaint should ring a bell and cause further investigation (Lesca & Blanco, 2002). The idea is not to rely only on complaints intelligence, but to use it like any other source, check it and analyse the correlation with other data.

Internal vs. external handling initiatives

An organization often implements internal handling initiatives to handle complaints itself. Examples are in-house customer service representatives or organization ombudsmen. Some industries and organizations implement external handling initiatives using a third party as an intermediary. Examples include dispute resolution mechanisms using third-party mediation and arbitration, private tribunals, outsourced call centres and industry association ombudsmen. These outsourcing solutions may be cost effective, but they raise the issue (among others) of what intelligence will be collected and how it will be processed. Moreover, can perception management be efficiently conducted in case of a sudden negative rumour, if a call centre is outsourced (not to mention that the outsourced call centre is often the focus of the complaint)? Nothing is less certain. At the very least, this issue should be considered carefully by complaint managers.

Dissemination of intelligence

Beyond the commercial relevance of complaint management, the research emphasizes its usefulness in gathering strategic intelligence. Considering the importance of complaints from an information perspective, marketing professionals should consider complaints as a strategic source that is likely to provide better understanding of both customer issues and a larger marketing environment. They also should be aware that such intelligence could be of great importance for non-marketing managers. Resources (human, financial, material) should be allocated to capture complaint data systematically, and those responsible for strategic intelligence should make sure that data held by customer services are correctly handled and disseminated. Table 1 can be helpful for the design of a collection grid that might be used to gather customer complaints. The responsibility of strategic intelligence managers is to help marketers to design the grid and then to analyse and disseminate the analytical output to interested parties in the firm. They should also benefit from collaboration with marketing managers and employees by using the complaint handling system as an interface with the firm's environment, where information can move in and out.

However, this research cannot provide a ready-made integration programme. A cross-functional team might be an interesting organizational answer. Fleisher et al. (2008) give an example of a successful insight team that managed to integrate market research, customer relationship information and Competitive Intelligence. The authors are clear that such a process is not readily replicable in other organizations, even though they put forward minimum conditions for success: a planned integration strategy, a structure, appropriate resources and executives supporting the project (Fleisher et al., 2008).

Conclusion and research implications

This paper has explored the complexity of complaint management from a strategic intelligence perspective. It is a new contribution to the body of research showing how the strategic intelligence gathering cycle can rely on existing practices. Moreover, it highlights the link between the strategic intelligence protection cycle and complaint management process using the perception management concept.

The most important finding of this research is an exploratory and theoretical model of the interactions between the complaint process and strategic intelligence. It offers a synthesis of past research but also raises questions. In particular, although the study shows the theoretical overlap of complaint management and strategic intelligence, the issue of the implementation of such an idea, that is, the allocation of the roles between complaint managers and any strategic intelligence managers, remains to be addressed. Future research should focus on identifying formal and informal processes of collaboration between the people who collect and process complaints (whether there is a formal complaint management system or not) and those who are in charge of strategic intelligence (whether this function is official or sparingly allocated).

Future research could also investigate the efficiency of the various complaint handling initiatives in collecting intelligence that is not only 'satisfaction' oriented, or in influencing perception improvement. An interesting question would be to look at the effect of perceived justice on the collection of more valuable insights.

Marketing practices can have an impact on strategic intelligence just as strategic intelligence can impact marketing practices. Complaints can not only open a dialogue between the customer and the business, but can be a vital initiator of high quality communication between marketing researchers and strategic intelligence specialists.

Acknowledgements

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