

AN EVALUATION OF EXPLANATION EFFECTS ON CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS

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Previous studies in organization theory have shown that advance notice for an event, such as job termination, is key in determining reactions to the event. Based on ANOVA, the authors demonstrate the positive effects for stores of providing advance explanations to customers, especially in situations with outcomes unfavorable to the customer. The analysis reveals that providing an explanation will result in higher justice perception, especially in the type of justification. Stores can adopt this low-cost idea of providing explanations to enhance the justice perception of their customers, and to maintain customer relationships, satisfaction, and loyalty. Implications and directions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: explanation effect, excuse, justification, justice perception.

In the same way that organizations have had to pay to recover employer-employee relationships, as consumer consciousness moves from peak to peak, companies spend more to maintain relationships with customers. In the marketing field, most companies focus on service recovery by using coupons or other costly compensations. To our knowledge, few studies have suggested that providing an explanation to customers could lessen dissatisfaction and complaints made after purchase (Conlon & Murray, 1996).

Initial theorizing on justice in organizations focused on the outcomes of employee-employer exchanges (Adams, 1963). The effect of explanation in

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mitigating antagonistic responses of employees has been widely discussed in organizational behavior as a replacement for economic purposes (Gilliland, 1994; Greenberg, Bies, & Eskew, 1991). The method of enhancing fairness perceptions researched in the social justice literature is that an explanation should be provided for a decision (e.g., promotion, layoff, hiring, or pay cut). Several studies have shown that providing an explanation reduces perceptions of unfairness in certain situations (Baron, 1990; Bies, Shapiro, & Cummings, 1988), however, few studies have applied the concept of explanation in other fields, such as consumer affairs.

This research on the effect of an explanation on perception is needed because explanations are potentially a low-cost method of enhancing fairness perceptions (Greenberg, 1990) and because the outcome of decisions is often a major determinant of fairness perceptions (Gilliland, 1994; Smither, Reilly, Millsap, Pearlman, & Stoffey, 1993). Thus, with this study, we provided theoretical and practical insights to marketing academicians and managers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

EXPLANATION EFFECT

According to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1993), an *explanation* is *the act or process of making something clear or understandable*. The term implies revealing the reason or cause for some event that is not immediately or entirely known. Scott and Lyman's (1968) general-purpose taxonomy of explanations may have triggered a good deal of scholarly interest when they distinguished between two types of explanations: excuses and justifications. *Excuses* are defined as *explanations in which the decisionmaker admits that the act in question is unfavorable or inappropriate, but denies full responsibility by citing some external cause or mitigating circumstance*. When using *justification*, *the decisionmaker accepts full responsibility, but denies that the act in question is inappropriate by pointing to the fulfillment of some other goal*.

Much of the literature on explanations is several decades old. Some more recent studies have shown that explanations can improve perception of justice (Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Gilliland & Beckstein, 1996), and some have predicted a variety of outcomes (Colquitt & Chertkoff, 2002; Gilliland, 1994). Other studies have described explanations as a more general response to a decision-making event (Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). In particular, Tyler and Blader (2000) defined the *co-operation explanation* as *an act to promote the goals of the group, such as citizen behavior or loyalty*.

Several studies have explored the effect of an explanation on perceptions of unfairness (e.g., Baron, 1990; Bies et al., 1988; Greenberg et al., 1991). While most studies have focused on providing only one type of explanation, a few

have explored the differential effects of different types of explanation. Effective explanations given by service providers may lower a complainant's perception of the seriousness of a failure, as persuasively argued by Bowen and Schneider (1999). Complainants expect the organization to explain why service failure occurred in the first place. Fair interpersonal treatment requires the provision of an explanation in the resolution of a failure (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). We adopted the concept of *beneficial effect* (Shaw et al., 2003) for the hypothesis, which refers to *positive effects on perceived improvement on any result*. Hence,

Hypothesis 1: Providing an explanation (whether excuse or justification) will result in more positive justice perceptions than will providing no explanation.

PRICE FAIRNESS

Perceived price fairness has been identified as one psychological factor that exerts an important influence on consumer reactions to price (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986). Some studies suggest that consumers are sometimes concerned with the fairness of a price, particularly a price increase, and they dislike and are often unwilling to pay a price that is perceived as unfair (Martins & Monroe, 1994).

Explanations have been shown to have a powerful influence on behavior in many contexts (e.g., Bies, 1987; Tyler & Bies, 1990) and have been offered as a relatively simple and effective human resource tool for promoting perceptions of fairness. Folger and Konovsky (1989) found that procedural justice accounted for more variance in subordinates' commitment to, and trust in, a supervisor than did distributive justice, whereas it accounted for less variance in employees' satisfaction with a pay rise. Campbell (1999) concluded that perceived unfairness lowers shopping intensity. Therefore, we surveyed the effect of an explanation regarding price change in this research with the belief that perception of fairness, consumer satisfaction, and loyalty will be improved when explanations are provided.

Hypothesis 2: Providing an explanation (whether excuse or justification) when an outcome is unfavorable will result in a greater change in positive justice perceptions than it will when an outcome is favorable.

JUSTICE

Justice theory has been applied in the marketing arena in the areas of service failure and customer complaint behavior (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Goodwin & Ross, 1989; Oliver & Swan, 1989; Tax et al., 1998). *Justice* is generally considered to be *an evaluative judgment about the appropriateness of a person's treatment by others* (Furby, 1986) and, within justice theory, is often conceptualized as being of three types: distributive, procedural, and interactional.

In a consumer complaint context, then, distributive justice refers to resource allocation and the outcome of exchange (Deutsch, 1975), procedural justice is concerned with the procedures used to reach the outcome of an exchange (Lind & Tyler, 1988), and interactional justice is the degree to which the people affected by a decision are treated with dignity and respect.

Distributive Justice Based on social exchange theory, *distributive justice* focuses on *the role of equity, where individuals assess the fairness of an exchange by comparing their inputs and outcomes to form an equity score* (Adams, 1963). An exchange is judged as fair when this equity score is proportional to the scores of referent others (Deutsch, 1985; Greenberg, 1996). Goodwin and Ross (1992) and Tax et al. (1998) found that distributive justice affects satisfaction with complaint handling, but the most commonly studied component of distributive justice is equity, which refers to the recipient's perception of whether or not rewards are proportional or fair given the amount of inputs (Tyler, 1994). In this study, we defined distributive justice as the extent to which customers feel they have been treated fairly with respect to the outcome, regardless of whether it was favorable or unfavorable. Hence, Hypothesis 3a is proposed:

Hypothesis 3a: Providing justification will result in more perceived distributive justice than will providing an excuse.

Procedural Justice *Procedural justice* refers to *the fairness of the procedures by which an outcome is evaluated*. Even when the perception of the outcome is that it is fair, procedures used to arrive at those outcomes may be unfair (Erdogan, 2002). The importance of procedural justice is explained by the control theory that Thibaut and Walker (1975) proposed, that is, that individuals have a desire to control what happens to them. Smith, Bolton, and Wagner (1999) reported a positive effect of procedural justice on satisfaction with service encounters, and Tax et al. (1998) reported a positive effect of procedural justice on satisfaction with complaint handling. Though not empirically tested, it seems reasonable to suggest that procedural justice can also affect overall firm satisfaction in a failure and recovery context. Both organizational psychologists (e.g., Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Greenberg, 1996) and market researchers (e.g., Seider & Berry, 1998) have suggested that procedural justice is important in exchanges involving conflict resolution because it enhances the probability of maintaining a long-term overall satisfaction between two parties. Hence,

Hypothesis 3b: Providing justification will result in more perceived procedural justice than will providing an excuse.

Interactional Justice *Interactional justice* has been defined as *the fairness of interpersonal treatment received during the execution of a procedure* (Bies & Moag, 1986) and emphasizes the importance of truthfulness, respect, and justification as fairness criteria for interpersonal communication. The fairness of interpersonal communication during the appraisal process constitutes

interactional justice perceptions. Thus, we developed Hypothesis 3c according to the definition of interactional justice, and assumed there would be obvious perception differences when consumers receive an explanation. Consumers will feel more justice when they receive a justification rather than an excuse.

Hypothesis 3c: Providing justification will result in more perceived interactional justice than will providing an excuse.

METHOD

DESIGN

A 2 (unfavorable or favorable outcome) \times 3 (no explanation, provide excuse, provide justification) independent group factorial design was utilized. Consistent with past research (e.g., Bies et al., 1988; Gilliland, 1994; Greenberg, 1990), the dependent variables measured were perceived justice (distributive justice, interactional justice, procedural justice), satisfaction (satisfaction with explanation, overall firm satisfaction) and loyalty.

PROCEDURE AND PARTICIPANTS

Participants were instructed to read the scenario when they were waiting for service or paying for service, and to answer the questions accordingly. A sample of 600 customers (324 female, 276 male) shopping at the largest entertainment store in Taiwan participated in this study. The mean age of participants was 26.76 years (SD 4.52). Participants were randomly allocated to one of the cells of the research design, with 100 per cell. Each participant was issued a questionnaire which contained one version of the price change and explanation type scenario.

MATERIALS

Independent Variables Outcomes were operationalized as: (a) favorable outcome, where the customers were notified that the service price decreased from \$50 to \$40; and (b) unfavorable outcome, where the customers were notified that the service price increased from \$30 to \$40. In the explanation condition, we used three circumstances: (c) no explanation; (d) excuse, where the attendant used a simple context to express the price change policy; and (e) justification, where the attendant was courteous and displayed concern or empathy to express full responsibility for the price change.

Dependent Variables To compare the effects of each scenario, we designed the questionnaire with three items for each construct. Procedural justice was measured with three items adapted from Folger and Konovsky's (1989) scale. A three-item scale measuring interactional justice was also used in this research. One interactional justice item was adopted from the research of Folger and Konovsky, and two items were based on a service recovery study that used a

perceived justice framework (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997). The interactional justice items reflected the degree to which the firm's service agents made an effort with the consumers and treated them with respect, courtesy, fairness, and honesty through the process of providing an explanation. Distributive justice was also measured with three items accounting for customer inputs (e.g., cost, anxiety) and outcomes. Satisfaction with an explanation and overall satisfaction with the firm were measured using three-item scales adopted from the research of Bitner et al. (1990). All dependent variables were measured using multi-item scales, with each item requiring a response on a 7-point continuum.

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

Our study examined which type of explanation can result in higher justice perception. Thus, we followed prior research (Davidow, 2003; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998) and adopted analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test our hypotheses. We also used the least significant difference test (LSD test) to compare groups, one pair at a time.

RESULTS

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Prior to the main analysis, we conducted preliminary data screening. To ensure that the assumptions of ANOVA were met, items comprising the justice perception, satisfaction, and loyalty scales were summed and averaged, with higher scores indicating a greater number of favorable evaluations. The Cronbach's alpha for the distributive justice (DJ), procedural justice (PJ), and interactional justice (IJ) scales were .83, .85 and .88, respectively.

ANOVA RESULT

Table 1 displays the means of participants' perception of justice with evidence related to Hypotheses 1, 2, 3a, 3b and 3c. In the following text, the symbols M_j , M_e , and M_n represent the score mean of justification, excuse or no explanation, respectively, provided for convenience. The overall results reveal that justice perception, satisfaction, and loyalty are higher when justification is provided than when an excuse or no explanation is provided. For example, the analysis reveals significant main effects of distributive justice ($F_{(2,597)} = 8.09$; $M_j^d = 4.62 > M_n^d = 4.33$, $M_j^d = 4.62 > M_e^d = 4.32$), procedural justice ($F_{(2,597)} = 4.34$; $M_j^p = 4.78 > M_n^p = 4.60$, $M_j^p = 4.78 > M_e^p = 4.54$), and interactional justice ($F_{(2,597)} = 6.27$; $M_j^i = 4.95 > M_e^i = 4.66$, $M_j^i = 4.95 > M_n^i = 4.88$). The results show the Hypothesis 1 and 2 are supported, and Hypothesis 3a~3c were partly supported.

When the outcome was unfavorable, the effects of providing justification on all justice perceptions, except interactional justice, were the highest among three

TABLE 1
EXPLANATION EFFECT ON PERCEIVED JUSTICE ENHANCEMENT

		Overall			Outcome Unfavorable (Fair 13% Unfair 87%)			Outcome Favorable (Fair 91% Unfair 9%)		
		Group 1 (N = 200)	Group 2 (N = 200)	Group 3 (N = 200)	Group 1 (N = 100)	Group 2 (N = 100)	Group 3 (N = 100)	Group 1 (N = 100)	Group 2 (N = 100)	Group 3 (N = 100)
		No explanation	Providing Excuse	Providing Justification	No explanation	Providing Excuse	Providing Justification	No explanation	Providing Excuse	Providing Justification
Distributive Justice	Mean (M^d)	4.33	4.32	4.62	${}^uM_e^d = 3.67$	${}^uM_e^d = 3.95$	${}^uM_e^d = 4.69$	$fM_e^d = 4.99$	$fM_e^d = 4.68$	$fM_e^d = 4.54$
	SD	0.98	0.8	0.71	0.72	0.62	0.68	0.72	0.8	0.74
	F test	$F(2,597) = 8.09, p < 0.001$								
	LSD test	Group 3 > Group 2****, Group 3 > Group 1****								
		Group 3 > Group 2****, Group 3 > Group 1**** Group 2 > Group 1**								
Procedural Justice	Mean (M^p)	4.6	4.54	4.78	4.13	4.19	4.73	5.06	4.89	4.83
	SD	1	0.79	0.72	1	0.64	0.7	0.76	0.77	0.75
	F test	$F(2,597) = 4.35, p = 0.013$								
	LSD test	Group 3 > Group 2**, Group 3 > Group 1*								
		Group 3 > Group 2**, Group 3 > Group 1** Group 2 > Group 1*								
Interactional Justice	Mean (M^i)	4.88	4.66	4.95	4.45	4.36	5.02	5.3	4.95	4.88
	SD	0.92	0.81	0.88	0.77	0.58	0.87	0.87	0.89	0.89
	F test	$F(5,297) = 6.27, p = 0.002$								
	LSD test	Group 3 > Group 2****, Group 3 > Group 1*								
		Group 1 > Group 2* Group 3 > Group 2**, Group 3 > Group 1** Group 1 > Group 2*								

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$, *** $p < 0.001$, **** $p < 0.001$

scenarios; the lowest was no explanation provided (e.g., the effect on procedural justice, $F_{(2,297)} = 17.10$; ${}^uM_j^p = 4.73 > {}^uM_e^p = 4.19 > {}^uM_n^p = 4.13$; and interactional justice, $F_{(2, 97)} = 22.70$, ${}^uM_j^i = 5.02 > {}^uM_e^i = 4.36$, ${}^uM_j^i = 5.02 > {}^uM_n^i = 4.45$). As for the effect of explanation on satisfaction and loyalty, the effect of providing justification is significantly higher than with an excuse or no explanation provided. More over, other significant results that are not shown in Table 1 were found. Overall firm satisfaction is highest when the explanation provided was of the justification type (comparison of ${}^uM_j^o = 4.62 > {}^uM_e^o = 4.3$, and ${}^uM_j^o = 4.62 > {}^uM_n^o = 4.39$), and the effect of providing justification on loyalty perception is significantly higher than is providing an excuse or no explanation ($M_j = 4.59 > M_e = 4.13$, and $M_j = 4.59 > M_n = 4.36$). In this scenario, Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 are all supported.

The effect of explanation on justice perception with favorable outcomes was the opposite of the result with unfavorable outcomes. The result revealed that with favorable outcomes, providing justification is not effective and is less effective than providing no explanation or an excuse (e.g., the explanation effect on distributive justice, $F_{(2,297)} = 9.66$, ${}^fM_j^d = 4.54 < {}^fM_e^d = 4.68 < {}^fM_n^d = 4.99$; and the explanation effect on interactional justice, $F_{(2,597)} = 6.39$, ${}^fM_j^i = 4.88 < {}^fM_e^i = 4.95 < {}^fM_n^i = 4.33$). Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 are rejected when the outcome is favorable.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The current study investigated the effects of three types of explanation provided to customers on distributive, procedural and interactional justice. The reason for providing someone with an explanation is to demonstrate that the treatment is fair (Bies & Moag, 1986; Tyler & Bies, 1990). Our results show that the explanations had a quite powerful effect on justice perception, especially when the outcome was unfavorable.

As some results drew on findings from previous studies (e.g., Davidow, 2003; Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998), a report is given here of how the organizational explanations for company policy affect the justice dimensions in the present study. Specifically, in addition to explanation type, the empirical findings indicated that explanation, especially with justification, was a necessary condition for perception of distributive justice.

Consumers expected to receive justification by the organization about the price change, and our analysis indicates that the justification explanation is positively associated with perceived justice. Of the two types of explanation, justification seemed to have a stronger effect on consumers' perceptions of interactional justice, procedural justice, and distributive justice than did an excuse, especially when the outcome was unfavorable. We also found that customers expected the organization to provide an explanation in a courteous manner. Our results

showed the effect of explanation on enhancing perceived justice. In addition, it was found that providing justification had a different proportional effect in different circumstances, but it is obviously effective in enhancing justice dimensions. This study also showed that the effect of justification on justice is stronger than that of an excuse when the outcome was unfavorable but not when the outcome was favorable.

We found in this study that the most important tool in a customer service employee's belt is the ability to provide explanations. The results of this study show the more an explanation is satisfactory the greater will be the customer's satisfaction overall with the firm or service provider, which has a great effect on customer loyalty. Thus, we suggest stores could adopt this low-cost idea of explanation to maintain customer relationships, satisfaction, and loyalty.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study, as any, has limitations. First, the specific service industry chosen for the empirical investigation was the entertainment industry, which may raise concerns about the issue of how well its findings can be generalized. Hartline and Ferrell (1996) observed that the selection of a single service industry eliminates problems associated with dealing with industry differences. Nevertheless, this limitation could be remedied in replication studies with large sample sizes in other industry settings. Second, this study was conducted in Taiwan with Taiwanese subjects, and the results may or may not be applicable to consumers in other cultures. It would be interesting if a future study determined whether or not culture influences customer perception when explanations are provided. Finally, longitudinal research on this subject could be useful. The process by which customers create their justice judgments is adjusted over time when they receive explanations, and the relationships between customers and service providers could be followed over a period of time.

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