

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN LIGHT OF BUYER USER SYNERGY

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Abstract: A comprehensive literature review of the various existing theories of consumer satisfaction reveals that most of the studies treat the buyer as the end consumer. However, there are numerous practical instances where the buyer necessarily does not consume the product or experience the service. Hence there is a need to understand the nature of satisfaction levels in scenarios that consider the buyer and the user as separate inter linked entities. The salient purpose of this work is to analyze the satisfaction of a customer as a buyer-user synergy in a business environment under a proposed conceptual framework. On the basis of the proposed conceptual framework, five propositions have been made that can be further tested empirically.

Keywords: Consumer satisfaction, buyer satisfaction, user satisfaction, buyer-user synergy, framework matrix, disconfirmation.

Motivation: The underlying inspiration has been to study customer satisfaction in an unconventional fashion by defining the customer as a synergy of buyer and user. This would help to bring in fresh arguments in this area. It is well argued in the literature of marketing that customer satisfaction leads to greater sales of products and services. The underlying inspiration has been to study customer satisfaction in an unconventional fashion by defining the customer as a synergy of buyer and user. Since most of the management problems are cross functional in nature and a flavour of the basic concepts of every domain, marketing being no exception, can be leveraged to draft effective solutions. Since consumer satisfaction forms an important part of the marketing and has an overlap with the study of human behavioural patterns, it has attracted many scholars across the globe.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer satisfaction is a popular phrase in the marketing parlance (Giese, J.L and Cote, J.A (2000)). There has been notable studies under different dimensions with diverse opinions viz., Mano, H and Oliver, R. (1993) as well as Luo, X and Homburg, C. (2007). It is generally defined as the extent to which the product or service of a company meet the expectations of the customers in light of fulfilling

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the desires and wants of a consumer. It has been a key metric as well as a true differentiator as far as the performance of the marketing domain is concerned. This happens because it shapes the purchasing pattern of the customers and induces customer loyalty. It is to be noted that in the studies done so far, the buyer is considered as the consumer and the consumer satisfaction is studied. This study under taken, considers consumer as a synergy of two different interlinked entities referred to as the buyer user synergy and the satisfaction of the buyer-user synergy is taken under consideration (Chakraborty, G., Srivastava, P and Marshall, F. (2007)). An effort was made to study the antecedents of the satisfaction for the user or buyer in across several functional areas but that study was limited in the sense that it did not take into account the individual impacts of the buyer and the user to analyze the overall satisfaction level. This study provides a conceptual basis for the analysis of the buyer-user synergy satisfaction level considering the constant interaction of the buyer with the user.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since consumer satisfaction forms an important part of the marketing and has an overlap with the study of human behavioural patterns, it has attracted many scholars across the globe. Studies on this aspect have been done over the years. There have been works such as Mano, H and Oliver, R.L. (1993) as well as Luo, X and Homburg, C. (2007) on theoretical developments as well as empirical validations. It is interesting to note that the study of the consumer satisfaction Yi, Y. (1989), Woo Kim, J., Magnusen, M., and Kyoum Kim, Y (2014) can be explained by the following theories. Churchill, G. and Surprenant, C. (1982). In 1982 expectancy disconfirmation theory was proposed that comprised the three key constructs: the expectations, the product performance and the disconfirmation. The customer expectations refer mainly to the desired performance characteristics of the product. This in turn falls under two broad sub groups: Tse, D. and Wilton, P. (1988) ideal product performance and expected product performance. The former refers to the performance of the product which is optimal or the performance which the customer thinks to be optimal while the latter refers to the most probable performance of the product. The concept of disconfirmation arises when there is a mismatch of the consumer expectations and the product's actual performance Oliver, R. L (1997). When the product performance is above the expected consumer performance, positive disconfirmation is acquired leading to satisfaction while negative disconfirmation occurs when product performance is less than the expected performance. This leads to dissatisfaction. In 1979, there was the introduction of the notion of comparison level theory. LaTour, S. and Peat, N. (1979) as well as Thibaut, J and Kelly, H. (1959). The expectancy disconfirmation theory places a lot of significance on the influence of the advertising and the claims made by the producers. The theory floated the idea of the post consumption theory. The principle idea that it proposed is that the measure of disconfirmation should

depend on the discrepancy of the observed and an “identified” standard. This is essentially the average level of the “same” or the “similar” outcomes the consumer had experienced in the past. Therefore the three determinants were: outcomes which the customer had experienced directly, the outcomes experienced from that of a similar product and the outcomes as claimed by the manufacturer. There was also the equity theory Adams, J.S. (1965) as well as Oliver, R.L. and Swan, J.E. (1989) which are based on the notion that the consumers would seek out balance as the feeling of being in an under and over rewarded state will lead to agony. It talked about the success in relationships between “buyers and sellers” as a key predictor of relational sustainability. In 1992, there was the concept of attribution theory Weiner, B. (1992) according to which individuals will explain success and failure in a way that will keep a positive self image. Folkes, V.S. (1984) These explanations come from three dimensions-on the basis of the origin of the underlying cause (internal or external), on the basis of their persistence over time (stable or unstable) and on the basis of volition (controllable and uncontrollable). Cadotte, E.R., Woodruff, R.B. and Jenkins, R.L. (1987). An extension of the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm was proposed in 1987 as the theory of norms as a comparative standard. According to this theory the accepted standard for the comparison should not only limit itself to “focal brand” but also involve other units of a given brand or the products of other similar brands that suffice the same customer needs. Westbrook, R.A. and Reilly, M.D. (1983). In 1983 the value percept disparity theory was proposed and it is also a norm based concept. It is based on the premise that consumer satisfaction is based on the emotional response. Spreng, R.A., Mackenzie, S.B., and Olshavsky, R.W. (1996). This emotional response is the outcome of the cognitive evaluative theory in which a person tries to compare the perceptions of the object with the consumer’s values, needs and desires. It was evident that the greater the disparity, the greater is the dissatisfaction predicted by the logic. There were also the dissonance theory, Folkes, V.S. (1984) which states that when a customer having high expectations about a product received a product of lower qualities or performance, the customer suffered from a state of psychological discomfort. It is also acknowledged that the customer satisfaction is not static but changes over time during the consumption of the service or product. Yi, Y. (1990). There was also the contrast theory, Danaher, P. J., and Arweiler, W. (1996) that states that when the product performance is always below the expected performance and this disparity is blown up to perceive the product inferior than it actually is. There was the evaluative cognitive model, Oliver R. L. & DeSarbo, W. S. (1988). which considers satisfaction to arise from an emotional state which is a result of a cognitive evaluation. It has three states negative congruity, congruity and positive congruity. The three states corresponds to dissatisfaction, neutral response and satisfaction respectively. Sirgy, J. M. (1984). Some big corporate defines consumer satisfaction by the 3C approach which stand for “customer journey consistency”, “emotional consistency” and the “communication consistency”.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A closer introspection would reveal that the customer, in most cases, can be viewed as the synergy of two entities: a buyer entity and an user entity. The buyer has been characterized by its willingness to pay and its ability to pay and the focal product or service directly serves the needs or desires of the user who lacks the buying capability. The user and the buyer are related through emotion or by rational interests. Neale, M and Bazerman, M. (1992). Simon, A. (1987). The marketer is posed as the third obvious entity in this framework. The marketer targets both the buyer and the user but the purchase transaction only occurs through the buyer. The user who is the actual consumer of the product or service does not directly enter into transaction with the buyer. Hence, the marketer has a selling interest and the buyer has the purchasing capability making the relationship reciprocal. Thus this framework having three entities with interactions among one another. The interaction between the buyer and user as well as the marketer and the buyer is bidirectional while that of the marketer and the user is unidirectional as shown in figure 1.

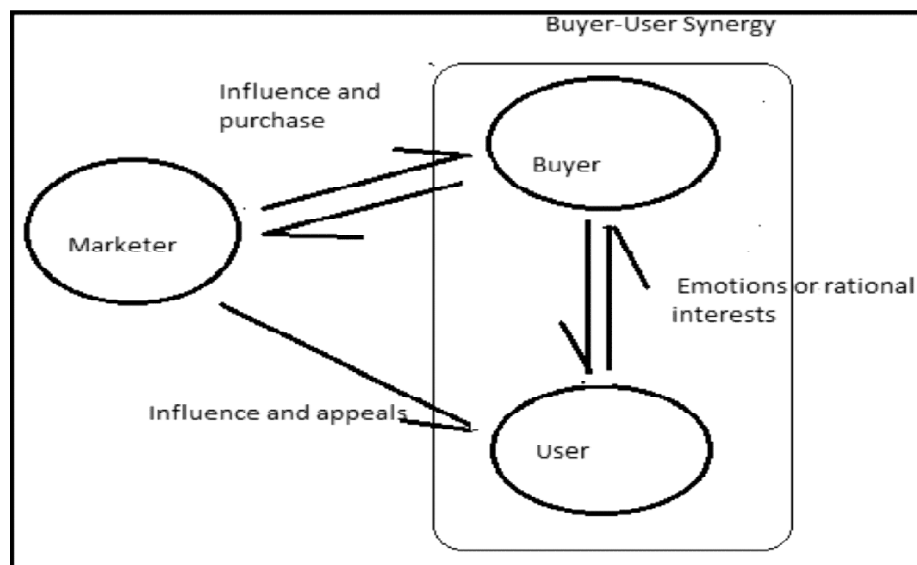


Figure 1: The buyer -user synergy and marketer conceptual framework

The Buyer -User Synergy Satisfaction Matrix

In order to have a graphical representation of the key idea involved, a buyer-user synergy satisfaction matrix has been proposed. On the horizontal axis, there is the satisfaction level of the buyer while the vertical axis represents the satisfaction level of the user. Thus each of the four quadrant formed would reveal a combination of the satisfaction level of the buyer and the user.

The first quadrant would represent positive satisfaction of both the user and the buyer while the third quadrant would represent low satisfaction of the buyer as well as the user. The second quadrant would represent a high user satisfaction but a low buyer satisfaction while the fourth quadrant would represent a high buyer satisfaction and a low user satisfaction. The intersection of the axes is taken as the common reference point. This has been illustrated in figure 2. Based on the combination of the satisfaction level of the buyer and the user, each represented by a quadrant, the five propositions are drawn. (P1, P2, P3a and P3b P4). These are discussed in the next section.

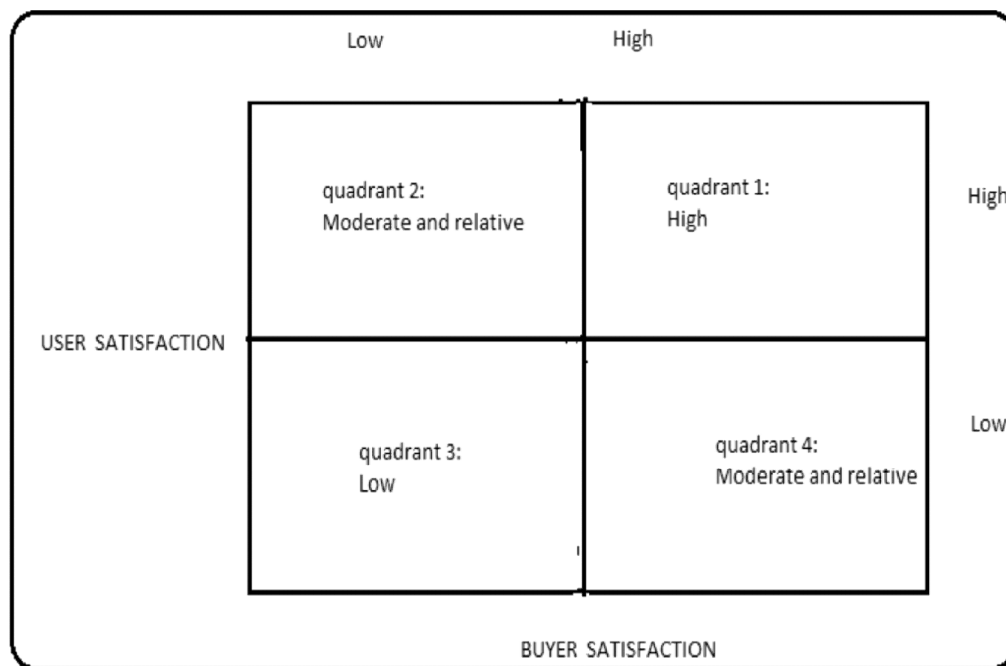


Figure 2: The buyer-user synergy satisfaction matrix

Propositions

P1: *A high user satisfaction as well as a high buyer satisfaction will lead to a high over all satisfaction of the buyer-user synergy.*

A situation is considered where a father (buyer) buys a Kit Kat for his daughter (user). The daughter finds the Kit Kat as the most appealing and to her it gives the most satisfactory taste of chocolate in India. Hence the Kit Kat would make her the most happy and thus would make her most satisfied because satisfaction has a cognitive evaluative component as well as an affective component, Weisis, H. (2002) and both this components in this case is positively impacting her satisfaction so that it reaches the high level. Barrick, M. R. (2005). The father is

emotionally entangled with his daughter .Therefore a high satisfaction level will lead to a high satisfaction level of the father .As a buyer he would also interpret the pennies spent on the chocolate as well spent.

Let us consider another situation where the IT officer(buyer) of a broking firm purchases a latest model of HP laser printer for the IT department staff(users). The staff would be banking on the utility of the product and their satisfaction would be reflected in their job performance which in turn would be manifested in the productivity. Weisis, H. (2002). A big productivity would make the officer satisfied as his rational interests are fulfilled. Hence the synergy has an overall high satisfaction level. This is the most favourable case as it corresponds to having the highest satisfaction level.

P2: *A low buyer satisfaction and a low user satisfaction would lead to low overall satisfaction of the buyer-user synergy.*

Lets revisit the earlier examples. A change in the scenario is considered. The father (buyer) buys a five star instead of or Kit Kat at the same price for his daughter(user). The daughter finds the five-star less appealing and to her it gives the least satisfactory taste of chocolate in India. Hence the 5-star would make her the least happy and thus would make her least satisfied because satisfaction has a cognitive evaluative component as well as an affective component and both this components in this case is negatively influencing her satisfaction so that it plummets to a low level. The father is emotionally entangled with his daughter .Therefore the daughter's low satisfaction level will lead to a low satisfaction level of the father. As a buyer he would also interpret that his money is not well utilized.

Let us consider another situation where an IT officer (buyer), in charge of the IT department of a broking firm purchases a latest model of Lenovo laser printer for the IT department staff (users). The staff would be having less affective satisfaction and their low satisfaction would be reflected in their poor job performance which in turn would be manifested in the low productivity. A low productivity of the staff would make the IT officer dissatisfied as his rational interests are at stake due to the expectancy disconfirmation. Hence, the synergy has an overall low satisfaction level. This is the most unfavourable case as it corresponds to having the lowest satisfaction level.

P3: *If the level of satisfaction is of opposite nature then*

P3a: *If the buyer satisfaction is high and the user satisfaction is low then the overall satisfaction of the synergy will be moderate and depend on the relative deviation of the buyer satisfaction from the reference to that of the user.*

Let us take a situation where the father presents his daughter with a ball point pen of the same price with an intention that it would be of great value in her daily study. The pen would be helping her in her regular writing work. However, the

daughter, being not interested in the pen, is extremely dissatisfied as the product neither appeals to her emotions nor her desires. In this case there is opposite nature of satisfaction and the stronger satisfaction would dominate the overall satisfaction of the synergy. However the father (buyer) by the virtue of his buying potential may seem to have greater impact as far as the purchase transaction is involved but from consumer satisfaction standpoint this is not true because the father is emotionally attached to his daughter and a prolonged dissatisfaction to a much higher extent would make the buyer-user synergy satisfaction moderate.

P3b: *If the buyer satisfaction is low and the user satisfaction is high then the overall satisfaction of the synergy will be moderate and depend on the relative deviation of the user satisfaction from the reference to that of the buyer.*

Let us take another example, where the daughter (user) urges her father to buy a very expensive laptop for her and this not only satisfies her wants but also has a high positive expectancy disconfirmation leading to a very high level of satisfaction. However, the laptop is of no use to the father (buyer) who has to only shell a very large sum. He feels the pain of payment as the product is of no use to him. He has dissatisfaction and this would bring down the satisfaction of the synergy. However if the daughter is more satisfied than the extent to which the father is dissatisfied, then the overall satisfaction of the synergy would increase as the buyer has emotional obligations towards the wishes of the user. This brings satisfaction level to moderate.

P4: *An increase in the satisfaction of the buyer-user synergy will lead to a positive impact on the sale transaction*

There is a plethora of evidences that sustained consumer satisfaction would lead to increase in the marketing performance of the company keeping all other factors constant. Thus an increase in the satisfaction of the buyer user synergy would also have a positive impact on the number and volume of the marketing transactions. The argument behind being that the buyer and user synergy behaves as a single unit of the consumer and therefore the principles of consumer satisfaction is also applicable to the synergy defined.

Managerial Implications

This has some meaningful implications ranging from shop floor management, product advertisement and designing the product attributes. In the shop floor management, the real users need to be identified and targeted along with the associated buyers. For instance for selling a microwave oven from a retail shop both the members of the couple need to be targeted because purchase decisions would be taken in a synergy. In case of advertising a product for children, endeavours should be made to link it to something that would arouse their fantasy and they would be more satisfied to have them. They in turn would push their parents to buy them one. The parents become nothing more than the passive buyers.

In reality the satisfaction of the buyer user synergy lies predominantly in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th quadrant of the conceptualized buyer-user synergy matrix. Therefore, this conceptual work hints for moving the satisfaction levels of both the users and the buyers toward the quadrant 1 as that would be the zone of the optimal combinations of the buyer user satisfaction .As a result this would dominantly have a positive impact on the marketing transactions keeping all the other factors constant.

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