

# CONSUMER DISSATISFACTION OR DISAPPOINTMENT: THE CRITICAL DIFFERENCE

William J. Bahr, Rockwell International

## ABSTRACT

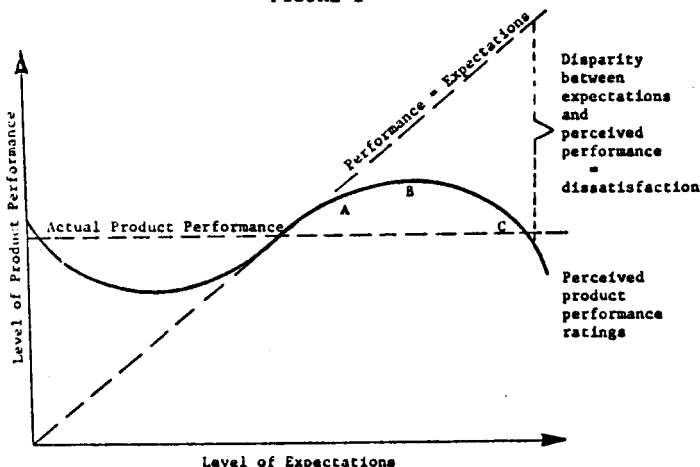
This study empirically investigates the concept of consumer dissatisfaction and its sub-concept, consumer disappointment. The study finds that disappointment can and should, for measurement reasons, be used as a substitute for dissatisfaction when the latter involves a negative change on a satisfaction scale due to unfulfilled expectations.

## INTRODUCTION

Marketing today is under attack from consumer advocates, government, mass media, and many consumers themselves (Rosenberg, Czepiel, and Akerele, 1978). On the lips of everyone from Ralph Nader to the next door neighbor is the rallying cry for this attack: consumer dissatisfaction. In a wide-ranging defense, the marketing community has focused upon the accusation that product performance does not meet marketing-generated consumer expectations. As a result, customer service departments have been up-graded, advertising toned down, and numerous in-house studies on consumer satisfaction commissioned. New interest in the area of consumer satisfaction has also been taken up by scholars. Invariably, their research findings--whether used by consumer advocates or corporate public relations personnel--will have a profound effect upon the outcome of the confrontation. It is vitally important, therefore, that any and all concepts central to this research be clearly and unmistakably defined. One such concept is that of dissatisfaction.

Most of the current marketing literature in the area of consumer dissatisfaction, in one way or another, asserts that dissatisfaction is the difference between consumer expectations and product performance. The first such definitional formulation of dissatisfaction is usually attributed to Howard and Sheth (1969). Later, in one of the most important works on consumer dissatisfaction, Rolf Anderson (1973) suggested that the relationship be graphed somewhat as in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1



Through close examination of such graphics, however, a major problem with this now almost traditional formulation comes to light. Specifically, one can easily grant that, at point C in Figure 1, consumer C rates the product's performance lower and thus feels more dissatisfied with the product than does consumer A. But one may find difficulty in also allowing that consumer B feels more dissatisfied with the product than does consumer A when, of all three consumers, consumer B is the one who gives the product its highest rating. If the user of the dissatisfaction formulation evaluates product performance on the commonly used satisfaction scale, where satisfaction and dissatisfaction are bipolar opposites, the previous example can be most disconcerting, for it appears that one person can simultaneously find a product both more satisfying and more dissatisfying than can another person. It should here be said that, although a few either have not used it or have found problems with it (Swan and Combs, 1976; Fornell, 1976), the use of the bi-polar satisfaction scale is prevalent and widespread (Hunt, 1977). Well-known users include, for example, the Customer Satisfaction Research Institute of Kansas City and the University of Tennessee Research Corporation.

A word from Noah Webster can help resolve this dilemma concerning satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Both of these concepts have evolved from the verb, to satisfy. Webster (1971) defines to satisfy as "to make happy: please...to conform to (accepted criteria or requirements): fulfill, meet." Following such a definition, it seems that dissatisfaction can mean not only general displeasure but also failure to meet expectations, not only disutility but also disappointment. Awareness of such a distinction in meanings allows resolution of the previously posed dilemma, for, presumably, the most strict marketing semanticist would agree that a consumer can simultaneously feel more satisfied with but also more disappointed with a product than can his neighbor. At this point, the strict marketing semanticist would also probably agree that the traditional marketing definition of dissatisfaction runs into problems when product performance is measured using a traditional bi-polar satisfaction/dissatisfaction (utility) scale, because, with respect to the definition, dissatisfaction is circularly defined and measured in terms of itself: dissatisfaction is the difference between consumer expectations and dissatisfaction (a measure of performance). Modified, the definition would better read: differential dissatisfaction is the difference between consumer expectations and absolute dissatisfaction.

The previously mentioned distinction in meanings is important not only to marketing researchers but ultimately as well to marketing practitioners, who must answer and decide just what are meant by charges of promoting "dissatisfactory" goods and services. Disappointed but generally pleased consumers are one problem. Dissatisfied and generally displeased consumers are another problem altogether. Therefore, to avoid more than just semantic confusion, it could be argued that the term disappointment should be used consistently as a substitute for dissatisfaction when dissatisfaction involves a negative change on a satisfaction scale due to unfulfilled expectations. In order to determine whether or not such usage of the concept of disappointment would be a valid and valuable addition to consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction research, the following empirical study was conducted.

Before proceeding, however, it should here be mentioned that, whereas the concept of disappointment involves unfulfilled expectations, marketing literature contains a great deal of controversy as to just what is meant by the term expectations. Articles by Cardozo (1965), Olshavsky and Miller (1972), Anderson (1973), Swan and Combs (1976), Olson and Dover (1978), Madden, Little, and Dolich (1978), Oliver (1977 and 1978), and numerous others treat expectations as expectations of product performance. Expectations are then, theoretically, said to be modified by perceived product performance to yield satisfaction. On the other hand, Day (1977) expands and breaks down expectations into three categories: 1) expectations about product performance or benefits; 2) expectations about costs of obtaining product benefits; 3) expectations about social approval or other derived benefits or costs resulting from the purchase. In another study, Peter and Tarpey (1975) enlarge upon the valence work of Lewin and Bilkey and develop expectations as the difference between positive and negative utility (i.e. "net perceived return"). Finally, a growing number of researchers have broadened the concept of expectations to mean expectations of satisfaction (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Golden and Peterson, 1976; Park and Bahr, 1980). It is this author's opinion that evaluations of expected satisfaction from product purchase versus those of expected product performance may be compared to evaluations of attitude toward the act versus those of attitude toward the object. In other words, modified by the total purchasing experience, expectations of satisfaction would thus seem to be the more encompassing and hence the more determining factor in the final outcome: consumer satisfaction. Indeed, the importance of viewing expectations as expectations of satisfaction would seem to be implied in the conclusion of Cardozo's (1965) article, perhaps the grandfather of all consumer satisfaction studies.

#### HYPOTHESES

In view of the preceding research, a number of hypotheses were constructed. The first group of hypotheses concerned the measurement of consumer satisfaction in both its expected and experienced forms. Borrowing freely from Day (1977), Golden and Peterson (1976), and Peter and Tarpey (1975), it was hypothesized that:

- 1a. Expected satisfaction is a linear function of the difference between expected benefits and expected costs.
- 1b. Experienced satisfaction is a linear function of the difference between experienced benefits and experienced costs.

A second group of hypotheses concerned the measurement of any difference between expected and experienced satisfaction. Borrowing freely from Howard and Sheth (1969, p. 147), it was hypothesized that:

- 2a. Disappointment is a linear function of the difference between expected satisfaction and experienced satisfaction.
- 2b. Differential dissatisfaction is a linear function of the difference between expected satisfaction and experienced satisfaction.
- 2c. Disappointment is a linear function of differential dissatisfaction.

A third group of hypotheses concerned the development of the concept of delight, a term that had possibilities for measuring experienced satisfaction exceeding expected satisfaction and thus serving as a positive counterpart to the term disappointment. The

primary hypothesis was that:

3. Delight is a linear function of the difference between experienced satisfaction and expected satisfaction.

A fourth and final group of hypotheses concerned whether or not satisfaction could not only be expressed as previously in "net present value" terms but also in "benefit over cost" terms. The primary hypotheses were that:

- 4a. Expected satisfaction is a linear function of expected benefits divided by expected costs.
- 4b. Experienced satisfaction is a linear function of experienced benefits divided by experienced costs.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN

Since the concept of disappointment involves unfulfilled expectations, a situation was sought in which consumers could be exposed to a controlled source of information about a new product. A new mail order product was found which had not previously been marketed and which was of such innovative nature as to initially preclude word-of-mouth advertising. Expectation generation could, therefore, be accomplished solely through use of magazine advertisement. An advertisement for the product was placed by the manufacturer, and the prospective subjects for the study were those individuals who saw the advertisement and purchased the product by mail-order. A file of names and addresses was thus obtained.

Ideally, satisfaction expectation measures should be obtained after message exposure but before purchase. For obvious reasons in this mail-order case, however, the author could not identify nor thereby contact those individuals purchasing the product before their actual purchases were made and their orders received in the mail. It was then thought that post-purchase--pre-trial expectation measures could be substituted. However, testing effects may have biased final results. As a control for this, therefore, post-purchase--pre-trial measures were combined with post-trial--consumer recall measures. The prospective respondents were randomly assigned to two groups. The first group (hereafter designated "before-after") received expectations questionnaires both before and after receiving the product. The second group (hereafter designated "after-only") received expectations questionnaires only after receiving the product. Both groups received cover letters from the University of Kansas School of Business explaining the general nature of the study and requesting participation. The time elapsed between order and receipt of product was approximately the same for both groups.

Included in the post-trial--consumer recall questionnaires were a number of questions of which the following were among the most pertinent:

When you decided to order the new product, how satisfied with it did you expect to be? (13 point bi-polar satisfaction scale)

Now that you've actually used the product, how satisfied with it are you? (13 point bi-polar satisfaction scale)

How disappointed are you that the new product did not live up to your expectations? (7 point disappointment scale)

How delighted are you that the new product more than lived up to your expectations? (7 point

delight scale)

On the whole, considering all sorts of benefit factors combined, how beneficial would you say it was to buy the new product? (7 point benefit scale)

On the whole, considering all sorts of cost factors combined, how costly would you say it was to buy the new product? (7 point cost scale)

It should be noted that these questions were interspersed throughout the questionnaire and that the post-purchase--pre-trial questionnaires included similar questions. Other questions in the survey dealt with the benefits and costs (and their respective likelihoods) of product purchase dimensions such as financial, temporal, psycho-social, safety, and performance, with results discussed in a later paper. 48 persons in the first group responded to both the pre-trial and post-trial questionnaires. 53 persons in the second group responded to the post-trial questionnaires. Overall response rate for both groups was over 75 percent.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The data was processed, and simple linear regression was run for each hypothesized relationship. The results are organized below for each hypothesis. Each Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient reported is positive and has been determined by t-test to be significant at the .05 level or better.

H<sub>1a</sub> Expected satisfaction = f(Expected benefits - Expected costs)  
Before-after group, n=48, r=.38 (r<sup>2</sup>=.14)

H<sub>1b</sub> Experienced satisfaction = f(Experienced benefits - Experienced costs)  
Before-after group, n=48, r=.71 (r<sup>2</sup>=.50)  
After-only group, n=53, r=.78 (r<sup>2</sup>=.61)

As is evident from these correlation coefficient values, a strong relationship exists between satisfaction and benefits minus costs. As is also evident, the relationship approximately doubled in strength as time passed and expectations turned into experience. This result is consistent with a study in which Sobel and McGuire (1977) found that actual satisfaction models were more accurate than anticipatory satisfaction models. It is also consistent with Olson and Dover's (1978) study in which they found that belief structure and overall attitude associated with a product become increasingly related and consistent over time as knowledge about the product accumulates.

H<sub>2a</sub> Disappointment = f(Expected satisfaction - Experienced satisfaction)  
Before-after group, n=48, r=.82 (r<sup>2</sup>=.67)  
After-only group, n=53, r=.56 (r<sup>2</sup>=.31)

When calculations were restricted to those respondents reporting no upshift in satisfaction level, the following was observed:

Before-after group, n=30, r=.88 (r<sup>2</sup>=.77)  
After-only group, n=32, r=.65 (r<sup>2</sup>=.42)

When calculations were restricted to those group respondents reporting only a downshift in satisfaction level, the following was observed:

Before-after group, n=14, r=.89 (r<sup>2</sup>=.79)  
After-only group, n=16, r=.58 (r<sup>2</sup>=.34)

When the calculations were restricted to those group respondents falling in the classic defini-

tional "performance not meeting expectations" category (here freely translated to mean a negative sum for (Experienced benefits - Experienced costs) minus (Expected benefits - Expected costs)), the following was observed:

Before-after group, n=16, r=.78 (r<sup>2</sup>=.61)

From these correlation values, it is evident that a strong relationship exists between disappointment and expected satisfaction minus experienced satisfaction. Also notable is the coefficient disparity between the two groups, which led to further investigation. In attempting to rule out testing effects, two sets of calculations concerning the before-after group were undertaken. The first concerned use of expected satisfaction values. The above computations employed expected satisfaction values obtained from post-trial questionnaires. When pre-trial expected satisfaction values were substituted, little overall change in the high correlation values was observed. The second calculation followed and concerned individual change in expected satisfaction values from pre-trial to post-trial period. Correlation between individual pre-trial and post-trial values resulted in an  $r$  of .58. While positive, this value was not as strong as the author expected. Some doubt then remained as to whether or not the group disparity was due to testing effects or over-time memory instability. However, if the after-only group could be said to have suffered approximately the same memory instability, then the disparity phenomenon reduces to one of testing effects. As suggested by Howard et al. (1979), the only procedure that leads to an unbiased estimate of treatment effects (in this case, testing effects) is the comparison of mean post-test retrospective difference scores. The mean post-test value of expected satisfaction for the before-after group was 2.916. The mean post-test value of expected satisfaction for the after-only group was 3.396. Using a test of two means, the difference between these means is not significant at the .05 level but is significant at the .15 level ( $t = -1.613$ , d.f. = 99).

No surprise as a result of earlier discussion, a major problem existed in testing the following hypothesis below, in that here dissatisfaction is a differential or relative measure, whereas the only direct dissatisfaction values obtained were ones of absolute measure on the bi-polar satisfaction/dissatisfaction scale. Directly obtaining a differential dissatisfaction value when a consumer's overall response to the product was a feeling of satisfaction was thus, in this instance, impossible. In testing the following hypothesis, therefore, differential dissatisfaction values were coded as "0" by the author when a consumer felt general satisfaction with a product. Otherwise, directly measured values of absolute dissatisfaction were used.

H<sub>2b</sub> Differential dissatisfaction = f(Expected satisfaction - Experienced satisfaction)  
Before-after group, n=48, r=.74 (r<sup>2</sup>=.55)  
After-only group, n=53, r=.72 (r<sup>2</sup>=.52)

When restricted to no upshift in satisfaction level:

Before-after group, n=30, r=.84 (r<sup>2</sup>=.71)  
After-only group, n=32, r=.80 (r<sup>2</sup>=.64)

When restricted to only a downshift in satisfaction level:

Before-after group, n=14, r=.73 (r<sup>2</sup>=.53)  
After-only group, n=16, r=.75 (r<sup>2</sup>=.56)

When restricted to the negative performance rating:

Before-after group, n=16, r=.81 (r<sup>2</sup>=.66)

From these correlation values, a strong relationship can be inferred to exist between differential dissatisfaction, as previously defined and limited, and expected satisfaction minus experienced satisfaction. Also notable is the general degree of similarity between these correlation values and those found earlier for the disappointment measures. This led to the investigation of the final sub-hypothesis and the correlation between disappointment and differential dissatisfaction.

$$H_{2c} \text{ Disappointment} = f(\text{Differential dissatisfaction})$$

For each of the various relationships previously investigated involving disappointment and dissatisfaction, the two were regressed against each other. The lowest reported  $r$  was .59, the highest .75. It would thus appear conclusive that disappointment and differential dissatisfaction are highly and positively correlated. Again, however, one must remember that the values of differential dissatisfaction could not be and were not obtained directly from the subjects but through open-to-question arithmetic construction. Because the values for disappointment could be and actually were obtained by measurement directly from the subjects, it appears to be the preferable and proper term to use in denoting a negative change on a satisfaction scale due to unfulfilled expectations.

With respect to the third group of hypotheses concerning the development of the concept of delight, a possible positive counterpart for the concept of disappointment, no results of any significance were obtained. In many cases, the respondents had difficulty distinguishing delight from satisfaction. The two terms were, more or less, seen as synonymous. No results of any significance were also obtained with respect to the fourth group of hypotheses concerning the "benefit over cost" formulation of satisfaction. It was suspected that the problem here lay with the data being interval rather than ratio. When costs were seen as "0," division was undefined.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has empirically investigated the concept of consumer dissatisfaction and its sub-concept, consumer disappointment. Although some attention has been paid to the concept of disappointment by previous researchers (Cardozo, 1965; Howard and Sheth, 1969), it has heretofore been virtually ignored and the more encompassing concept of dissatisfaction used in its place. This lack of precision has had the potential to cause much confusion, both in the area of consumer research and the real world of the market place. This study has found that disappointment can and should, for measurement reasons, be used as a substitute for dissatisfaction when the latter involves a negative change on a satisfaction scale due to unfulfilled expectations. Such usage not only preserves the traditional bi-polar satisfaction/dissatisfaction scale intact for ascertainment of overall product benefit to the consumer but also allows for more definitive research into the general area of consumer dissatisfaction.

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