

I Told You So!

Restaurant Customers' Word-of-mouth Communication Patterns

When restaurant food service goes awry, one might expect the unsatisfied guest to go out and complain to her friends. In fact, word-of-mouth patterns—good or bad—are more complicated than that.

BY ALEX M. SUSSKIND

Since it is not possible to eliminate service failures completely, restaurant managers need to understand the elements that influence customers' complaints that almost inevitably arise from those failures. Building on previous research, the study described in this article examines consumers' reactions to a restaurant's food-service failure. In particular, I examine how the nature of a service failure together with the restaurant's service-recovery effort influences customers' intentions to return to the restaurant and their subsequent word-of-mouth communication regarding the incident and the restaurant.

Service Failure and Subsequent Communication
Consumers who are dissatisfied with a service experience may make any of several responses. They can, for instance, quietly exit, never to return; they can continue to patronize the es-

tablishment even though its service does not meet their expectations; or they can voice their concerns to the operator in the hope of righting matters on the spot.¹ Regardless of their course of action—and regardless of the outcome—consumers are likely to tell some of their acquaintances about their service experiences.² This investigation shows how

¹ See: Raymond R. Lui, Harry S. Watkins, and Youjae Yi, "Taxonomy of Consumer Complaint Behavior: Replication and Extension," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, Vol. 10 (1997), pp. 91–103; and Jagdip Singh, "Voice, Exit, and Negative Word-of-mouth Behavior: An Investigation across Three Service Categories," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 18 (1990), pp. 1–15.

² See: Dwayne D. Gremler, Kevin P. Gwinner, and Steven W. Brown, "Generating Positive Word-of-mouth Communication through Customer–Employee Relationships," *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 12 (2001), pp. 44–59; Marsha L. Richins, "Negative Word-of-mouth by Dissatisfied Consumers: A Pilot Study," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 47 (1983), pp. 68–78; and Richard A. Spreng, Gilbert D. Harrell, and Robert D. Mackoy, "Service Recovery: Impact on Satisfaction and Intentions," *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 9 (1995), pp. 15–23.

© 2001, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

word-of-mouth communication emerges from service experiences. I argue that equity theory is the principal mechanism by which consumers evaluate service outcomes against their service expectations.

On balance. Equity theory suggests that consumers evaluate service experiences by assessing the balance between what they receive and what they expected, including the cost of the service.³ An equity examination of this kind can take place at any point during the service exchange. For

Research hasn't always supported the long-established notion that dissatisfied consumers talk more about their experience than do those who are satisfied.

example, restaurant customers may experience service that they perceive to be slow or inattentive, or they could receive a food order that is somehow unsatisfactory. Customers are then faced with the task of having the service experience adjusted in some way to align the outcomes with their expectations. Consumers typically evaluate the components of a service individually (such as food, service, and ambience) rather than as a total picture.⁴ This type of attribute-based evaluation is exemplified by a classic phrase regarding dining experiences: "the food was good, but the service was terrible." That phrase exemplifies the way consumers differentiate among the particulars of an experience, even when the experience involves both satisfying and dissatisfying elements.

Sharing Experiences

Word-of-mouth communication simply involves people sharing their assessment of their experi-

ences.⁵ Word-of-mouth communication, which relates both to positive and negative evaluations of service encounters, has been shown to influence other people's purchase behavior. Positive word-of-mouth communication is reported to emerge from satisfying service encounters, while negative communication generally emerges from dissatisfying encounters.⁶ Having said that, let me note that this study did not measure the specific content of the respondents' word-of-mouth communication. Therefore it is not possible to determine whether the word-of-mouth communication about the noted service failures was positive or negative, although one may make certain assumptions.

The long-established notion that dissatisfied consumers talk more about their experience than do those who are satisfied has not been wholly supported by existing research. Indeed, a handful of studies have reported that *satisfied* customers engage in more word-of-mouth communication than do dissatisfied customers,⁷ while other studies have reported a U-shaped relationship in which intense word-of-mouth communication is most strongly associated with customers who are either highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied.⁸ Conversely, other studies have reported that dissatisfied customers do, in fact, engage in more word-of-mouth communication than do satisfied customers.⁹

³ See: Stacy J. Adams, "Inequity in Social Exchange," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 2 (1965), pp. 267-299; and Valarie S. Folkes, "Consumer Reactions to Product Failure: An Attribution Approach," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 10 (1984), pp. 398-409.

⁴ V. Mittal, W.T. Ross, Jr., and P.M. Baldasaric, "The Asymmetric Impact of Negative and Positive Attribute-level Performance on Overall Satisfaction and Repurchase Intentions," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 62 (1998), pp. 33-47.

⁵ For descriptions of how value and equity are perceived by consumers in service experiences, see: Ellen Day and Melvin R. Crask, "Value Assessment: The Antecedent of Customer Satisfaction," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Complaining Behavior*, Vol. 13 (2000), pp. 52-60; Folkes, pp. 398-409; and *Ibid.*

⁶ See: Gillian Naylor and Susan Bardi Kleiser, "Negative versus Positive Word-of-mouth: An Exception to the Rule," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Complaining Behavior*, Vol. 13 (2000), pp. 26-36; and Spreng *et al.*, pp. 15-23.

⁷ See: John E. Swan and Richard L. Oliver, "Postpurchase Communication by Consumers," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 65 (1989), 516-533; and Davidow, pp. 473-490.

⁸ Eugene W. Anderson, "Customer Satisfaction and Word-of-mouth," *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 1, pp. 5-17.

⁹ Moshe Davidow and James H. Leigh, "The Effects of Organizational Complaint Responses on Consumer Satisfaction, Word-of-mouth Activity, and Repurchase Intentions," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, Vol. 11 (1998), pp. 91-102 (some of the findings reported here involve products instead of services).

Type of Complaint

A service episode comprises a set of interrelated elements. Restaurant service, for instance, involves two primary components, those being the food (and beverages) and the service delivery itself. For most restaurants, physical characteristics pale in comparison to the core product- and service-related elements.¹⁰ While exceptions to this generalization exist, a restaurant's environment can generally take it only so far, as operators in the "eatertainment" segment of the industry, such as Planet Hollywood, will attest.¹¹ Indeed, some theme-restaurant operators, such as ESPN Zone and Outback Steakhouse, insist that the customers' experience with the food and beverage is their core element and accord it top priority.¹²

Because food and beverage offerings and service constitute the two primary drivers of a restaurant's long-term success, separating food and service from ambience is important when evaluating start-to-finish service episodes. People will not long return to a restaurant if its core offerings are not in line with their expectations.¹³ Failures in concept execution notwithstanding, it appears important to examine the core elements of service experiences, especially because it is with those elements that organizations most clearly distinguish themselves from their competitors. My first research question, then, is: When dealing with a specific service failure and remedy, does the object of the failure in the restaurant experience (i.e., food or service) have a particular influence on word-of-mouth communication?

Complaint Remedies

The extent to which service providers correct dissatisfying elements of a service experience will

probably vary according to the specifics of the service failure.¹⁴ I would argue that a minimal service failure, such as letting a water glass get empty before being refilled, requires a smaller remedy (that being to apologize and fill the glass) than does a more substantial service failure, such as improperly prepared food or consistently lax service.

Previous researchers have often presented contrasting recovery actions to see how respondents would react to varying degrees of correction—that is, high-effort interventions and low-effort interventions. Such steps as offering free food, discounts, or coupons, or offering a manager's intervention are seen as corrections involving a high degree of effort. On the other hand, actions such as making service or food adjustments, offering apologies, or doing nothing to correct the problem were offered as low-correction actions.¹⁵ While one might think that the degree of correction is the key to a successful service recovery, a recent study found that the degree of compensation did not significantly influence respondents' intentions to return, their satisfaction with the remedy, or their subsequent word-of-mouth communication.¹⁶ That finding suggests that the degree of correction is not the only element that influences consumers' perceptions of the recovery process.

Positive and negative corrections. A consumer's final view of a service process is a function of the initial service offerings and exchanges together with any necessary corrections or adjustments (taking into account the opportunity cost in time and money). When a problem occurs, the guest then assesses the nature of the correction as an element of the restaurant experience, along with the food, service, and ambience. Researchers have found that negative attributes seem to have a greater influence on

¹⁰ See: Franchise Finance Corporation of America (FFCA), *Chain Restaurant Industry Review and Outlook* (Scottsdale, AZ: Franchise Finance Corporation of America, 2001); and Rick Ramseyer, "The Show Must Go On," *Restaurant Business*, July 1, 2001, pp. 49–57.

¹¹ See: *Ibid.*; and Amy Spector, "Nation's Restaurant News' HOT Concepts! ESPN Zone, Expanding Theme Restaurant Changes the Sports-dining Playbook," *Nation's Restaurant News*, Vol. 35, May 14, 2001, pp. 44, 46.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See: Franchise Finance Corporation of America, *op. cit.*; and Ramseyer, pp. 49–57.

¹⁴ See: Douglas K. Hoffman, Scott W. Kelley, and Holly M. Rotalsky, "Tracking Service Failures and Employee Recovery Efforts," *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 9 (1995), pp. 49–61.

¹⁵ Dennis E. Garrett, "The Effectiveness of Compensation Given to Complaining Consumers: Is More Better?," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Complaining Behavior*, Vol. 12 (1999), pp. 26–34.

¹⁶ Mittal *et al.*, pp. 33–47.

customers' overall evaluations than do positive attributes. That type of finding suggests that service failures not appropriately corrected invite increased levels of dissatisfaction—a supposition consistent with equity theory.¹⁷ The guests' assessment of the correction is treated as a separate matter from whether they were satisfied overall. Accordingly, my second research question is: When dealing with a specific service failure and remedy, does the degree of correction (i.e., high or low) coupled with the experience with the

Correction efforts were undone when servers made excuses, seemed indifferent to guests' problems, or showed a bad attitude while fixing the problem.

correction (i.e., positive or negative) have a distinctive relationship to word-of-mouth communication?

The measure of experience with the correction assesses how guests feel about the restaurant's attempts at correcting problems that have occurred. To clarify this point, examples of negative correction experiences given by my respondents were such comments as "the server made excuses," "the server was indifferent to my problem," or "the server gave me attitude while fixing the problem." On the other hand, examples of positive correction experiences include "the problem was corrected immediately," or "the service quality improved." Again, these comments do not necessarily bear a direct relationship with the guests' overall satisfaction.

Complaint Satisfaction

When consumers complain about service, they eventually form a judgment (based on their service-recovery expectations) about how well their complaint was handled. That judgment does not depend entirely on the outcome of the complaint; also critical are how the complaint and remedy were handled. One would expect con-

¹⁷ See: Adams, pp. 267–299; Folkes, pp. 398–409; Davidow and Leigh, pp. 91–102.

sumers' satisfaction to rest on the organization's ability to return the consumer to a "pre-complaint state."¹⁸ Equity theory suggests that when consumers are presented with an acceptable recovery action, their perceptions of satisfaction increase—usually resulting in an overall positive perception despite the failure.¹⁹ The reverse is also true, however.²⁰ My intent was to examine the extent to which respondents' satisfaction with complaint handling (rather than with the entire service experience) is related to subsequent word-of-mouth activities. Thus, my third research question is: When dealing with a specific service failure and remedy, does customers' satisfaction with the complaint remedy identifiably influence their word-of-mouth communication?

Patronage Intentions

A chief influence in consumers' intentions to return to a restaurant following a service failure is whether they feel that they have been treated equitably in the service-recovery process.²¹ While previous research has shown a strong positive association between satisfaction and intent to return,²² few studies have examined the direct relationship between intent to return and word-

¹⁸ Compare to: Moshe Davidow, "The Bottom-line Impact of Organizational Responses to Customer Complaints," *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 24 (2000), pp. 473–490; *Ibid.*; Naylor and Kleiser, pp. 26–36; and Richard L. Oliver and John E. Swan, "Consumer Perceptions of Interpersonal Equity and Satisfaction in Transactions," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 53 (April, 1989), pp. 21–35.

¹⁹ In the parlance of equity theory, when the inputs become realigned with the outputs individuals should become more satisfied. While this does not speak directly to word of mouth, it drives at how perceptions of satisfaction form.

²⁰ Cathy Goodwin and Ivan Ross, "Consumer Responses to Service Failures: Influence of Procedural and Interactional Fairness Perceptions," *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 25 (1992), pp. 149–163.

²¹ See: Davidow, pp. 473–490; Davidow and Leigh, pp. 91–102; Amy K. Smith, Ruth N. Bolton, and Janet Wagner, "A Model of Customer Satisfaction with Service Encounters Involving Failure and Recovery," *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 36 (1999), pp. 356–372; and Spreng *et al.*, pp. 15–23.

²² See: Stephen S. Tax and Murali Chandrashekar, "Consumer Decision Making Following a Failed Service Encounter: A Pilot Study," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Complaining Behavior*, Vol. 5 (1992), pp. 55–68; and Davidow and Leigh, pp. 91–102.

of-mouth communication.²³ Along this line, my fourth research question is: When dealing with a specific service failure and remedy, does customers' intent to return influence their word-of-mouth communication?

To begin to answer the above questions, I interviewed 310 patrons in shopping malls located in the eastern and the midwestern United States. To solicit the interviews, I set up a table in front of each mall's food court at various times over a two-month period. I offered participants a lottery ticket in exchange for filling out the survey. Although the participants were mainly in their early 20s, the age distribution ranged from 18 to 70.²⁴ The gender proportion was 31 percent men and 69 percent women.

Critical incidents. To gather information about a recent complaint experience, I asked the participants to answer questions about the specific elements of a dining experience that had occurred in the previous six months during which they had encountered a service failure and had complained on the spot to the service provider. I started with two open-ended questions—one that asked the respondents to describe the specific object of their complaint and another that asked the respondents to describe how the service providers handled the specific complaint.

When I classified the responses using content analysis,²⁵ I found two basic classes of complaint, namely food-related complaints and service-related complaints. The analysis of the responses to question two resulted in a two-by-two classification based first on the degree of correction administered by the service provider to fix the problem (noted as low or high) and second on whether the customers viewed their experience

²³ Alex M. Susskind, "Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? A Content Analysis of Consumer Complaints, Remedies, and Re-patronage Intentions Regarding Service Experiences." Working Paper Number 06-28-01, Center For Hospitality Research, School of Hotel Administration, Cornell University, 2001.

²⁴ Mean age = 21.81, standard deviation = 5.21, median age = 21.

²⁵ See: *Ibid.* The software and analysis procedure applied was specified in William Trochim, *The Concept System, Version 1.751* (Ithaca, NY: Concept Systems Inc., 1999); and William Trochim, *The Concept System Facilitator Training Manual* (Ithaca, NY: Concept Systems Inc., 1999b). Available at: www.conceptsystems.com.

EXHIBIT 1

Classification of experiences and remedies

		Experience	
		Positive Outcome	Negative Outcome
Degree of Correction	High Correction	Positive Outcome High Correction $n = 101$	Negative Outcome High Correction $n = 14$
	Low Correction	Positive Outcome Low Correction $n = 120$	Negative Outcome Low Correction $n = 75$

positively or negatively (taking the correction specifically into account). The resulting four-square matrix was labeled as follows: (1) a low degree of correction and a negative outcome, (2) a low degree of correction and a positive outcome, (3) a high degree of correction and a negative outcome, and (4) a high degree of correction and a positive outcome. The complaints, remedies, and the range of correction noted by my respondents were consistent with the findings of other studies examining restaurant patrons' responses to service failure and recovery.²⁶

Descriptively, 98 respondents (31.6 percent) reported a food-related complaint, while 212 respondents (the remaining 68.4 percent) reported a service-related complaint. (That finding by itself might give restaurant operators pause.) With regard to correction efforts and satisfaction with the outcome, 75 respondents (24.2 percent) reported a low degree of correction and a negative outcome, 120 respondents (38.7 percent) reported a low degree of correction and a positive outcome, 14 respondents (4.5 percent) reported a high degree of correction and a negative outcome, and 101 respondents (32.6 percent) reported a high degree of correction and a positive outcome (see Exhibit 1).

²⁶ Compare to: Hoffman *et al.*, pp. 49–61; and D.S. Sundaram, Claudia Jurowski, and Cynthia Webster, "Service Failure and Recovery Efforts in Restaurant Dining: The Role of Criticality of Service Consumption," *Hospitality Research Journal*, Vol. 20 (1997), pp. 137–149.

EXHIBIT 2

Descriptive statistics and correlations

	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Complaint type	-	-	-				
Experience with correction	-	-10	-				
Complaint satisfaction	-	-	.05	-.59*	-		
Intent to return	-	-	-.08	.38*	-.42*	-	
WOM Communication	3.87	4.88	-.07	-.23*	.25*	-.36*	-

Notes: Listwise $N = 310$.

Means and standard deviations were not calculated for the categorical variables.

* = $p < .001$

When consumers observe that a restaurant is offering a low level of correction, they appear to talk about those experiences readily, regardless of whether the experience was ultimately positive or negative..

Survey measurement. In addition to the customers' reports of their complaint described above, the participants were asked to respond to two yes-or-no questions: (1) Was the complaint handled to your satisfaction? and (2) Did the service failure and remedy diminish your desire to return to the restaurant? I examined the responses to those two questions in relation to respondents' word-of-mouth communication. A descriptive analysis revealed that 221 of the participants (71.3 percent) indicated that their complaint was remedied to their satisfaction, while 89 (the remaining 28.7 percent) reported that their complaint was not handled to their satisfaction. Regarding their intent to return, 135 respondents, or 43.5 percent, indicated that the service experience negatively influenced their intentions, while 175 participants (the remaining 56.5 percent) indicated they would return to the restaurant despite the recent service failure. Last, I asked the respondents to report the number of people whom they told about their experience relating to the service failure. On average the participants told 3.78 people about that experience, although some told no one and some reported telling many more—one claimed to have told 30 people.²⁷

I analyzed the data using analysis of variance (ANOVA) with word-of-mouth communication as the outcome variable, and complaint type, experience with correction, complaint satisfaction, and intent to return as the independent factors. (Listwise deletion applied across all of the variables resulted in the final usable sample of 310 customers.) The analyses of the main effects and the two-way interactions are described below.

The overall model fit the data quite well, explaining 59 percent of variance in customers' word-of-mouth communication (see Exhibit 2).²⁸ Exhibit 2 displays a breakdown of word-of-mouth communication by response category, and Exhibit 3 reports the complete output from the statistical analyses (ANOVA).

What Affects WOM?

Of the four possible influences of word-of-mouth communication presented in the model, three of

²⁷ Standard deviation = 4.88, median number of people told = 2.

²⁸ ($F[28, 282] = 14.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .59$)

the relationships showed notable effects. Those influences are whether the complaint involved food (as opposed to service), the effort spent on correcting the error, and the fact that customers did not plan to return to the restaurant. In all three of those cases, the respondents were highly likely to discuss their experience.

Getting the food right. Respondents with a food-related complaint told more people about their experience (an average of 5.39 people) than those whose problem involved service (an average of 3.92).²⁹ Customers also engaged in more word-of-mouth communication when they received what they considered to be a low degree of correction compared to receiving a high degree of correction, especially when that low degree of correction ended up in a negative experience. So, for instance, my respondents who said they experienced low correction in an experience that was ultimately negative told an average of 5.52 people, while those who had a low correction effort but a positive experience told an average of 4.17. Those numbers dropped to an average of 2.00 people when the correction level was high, even if the experience was negative, and 2.71 when the correction level was high and the experience was positive.³⁰ Those findings suggest that less is not necessarily more. When consumers observe that a restaurant is offering a low level of correction, they appear to talk about those experiences more readily, regardless of whether the experience was ultimately positive or negative.

Lost. Customers who indicated that they would not return to the restaurant following their complaint told significantly more people (an average of 7.86) than did those who were planning to return (an average of 2.77).³¹ This suggests that customers who will not return to a restaurant based on their experience will readily take it upon themselves to inform others not only of their restaurant experience but also of their decision to stay away from that restaurant. Strangely enough, there was no statistically significant difference in the level of word-of-mouth communication

EXHIBIT 3

Tests of between-subject effects

Dependent Variable: Word-of-Mouth Communication

	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	η^2
Model	6933.45	28	247.62	14.26	.000	.59
Main Effects						
Complaint type	112.32	1	112.32	6.47	.012	.02
Experience with correction	178.85	3	59.62	3.43	.017	.04
Complaint satisfaction	10.71	1	10.71	.62	.433	.002
Intent to return	850.99	1	850.99	49.00	.000	.15
Two-way Effects						
Complaint type × Correction	219.63	3	73.21	4.22	.006	.04
Complaint type × Satisfaction	122.10	1	122.10	7.03	.008	.02
Correction × Satisfaction	448.55	3	149.52	8.61	.000	.08
Complaint type × Intent to return	28.87	1	28.87	1.66	.198	.006
Correction × Intent to return	204.59	3	68.20	3.93	.009	.04
Satisfaction × Intent to return	210.90	1	210.90	12.14	.001	.04
Three-way Effects						
Complaint type × Correction × Satisfaction	118.05	2	59.03	3.40	.035	.02
Correction × Satisfaction × Intent to return	375.79	3	125.26	7.21	.000	.07
Complaint type × Correction × Intent to return	32.25	3	10.75	.62	.603	.007
Complaint type × Satisfaction × Intent to return	3.65	1	3.65	.21	.647	.001
Error	4897.55	282	17.37			
Total	11831.00	310				

²⁹ $F[1, 282] = 6.47, p = .01, \eta^2 = .02$

³⁰ $F[3, 282] = 3.43, p = .02, \eta^2 = .04$

³¹ $F[1, 282] = 49.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$

reported by customers who were satisfied following the complaint experience and those who were not satisfied, although the dissatisfied customers did tell a few more people (an average of 5.97) than did the satisfied customers (who told an average of 4.41 people).

Complaint and Correction

Checking multiple interactions, I found a significant relationship between word-of-mouth activity and the type of complaint combined with the degree of correction. This indicates that the root of the customers' complaints (i.e., food-related or service-related) coupled with how the complaint was handled led to different patterns of word-of-mouth communication.³²

Food-related complaints. Compounding their propensity to tell about their experience, respondents who lodged a food-related complaint engaged in considerable word-of-mouth communication if they experienced a low degree of correction connected with a remedy that they considered to be negative (telling an average of 9.94 people). On the other hand, those with food-related concerns told few people (an average of 2.75 people) if they experienced a high degree of correction coupled with a positive remedy. Thus, failing to make a strong effort to address customers' food-related complaints means that customers will talk about the experience—undoubtedly to the restaurant's detriment. People in the other two categories fell between those two extremes. (That is, the low correction–positive experience group members told an average of 5.50 people, and the high correction–negative experience respondents told an average of 3.17 people). Once again, though, a low degree of correction was connected to relatively more word-of-mouth communication.

Service-related complaints. The communication pattern was different for respondents who lodged a service-related complaint, because in this case the ones who were most likely to talk about their experience were those who were given the greatest attention and had a positive experience. This high correction–positive experience group told a considerable number of people about their

experience (an average of 9.05 people), while the high correction–negative experience group engaged in the least word-of-mouth communication (telling an average of just 1.71 people). Of the other two remedy categories, those with low correction and positive experience (with an average of 4.55 people) told more people than did those in the group of low correction–negative experience (an average of 3.56 people). That comparison further supports the finding that a positive experience with a service-related complaint leads to more word-of-mouth communication than does a negative experience, although (as noted earlier) my study does not indicate the nature of that communication. It should be noted, however, that a high degree of correction without a positive experience regarding the correction had little post-purchase influence on word-of-mouth communication.

The satisfaction connection. The relationship between complaint type combined with the extent of individuals' satisfaction also had a statistically significant effect on word-of-mouth communication.³³ The customers who reported service-related complaints engaged in the most word-of-mouth communication when they were unsatisfied with the service recovery (telling a mean of 7.16 people) and told the fewest (an average of 2.97) when they were satisfied. People who remained dissatisfied after food-related complaints actually told fewer people on average (4.59) than did those whose food-related complaints were satisfied (averaging 6.06).

Making the Effort

Another significant interaction with subsequent communication was the level of correction combined with complaint satisfaction.³⁴ That suggests that the way the complaint was handled together with whether the customers were satisfied with the remedy led to different patterns in word-of-mouth communication regarding the restaurant experience. The pattern, however, was mixed. Even when a restaurant made a high effort at correction and the respondents said that the correction experience was positive, if those persons

Failure to make a strong effort to address a customer's food-related complaint means that customer likely will talk about the experience.

³² ($F[3, 282] = 4.22, p = .006, \eta^2 = .04$)

³³ ($F[1, 282] = 7.03, p = .008, \eta^2 = .02$)

³⁴ ($F[3, 282] = 8.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$)

still did not leave satisfied, then that person told an average of 8 people (but a median of just 1 person)—which is more than any other group. Oddly, the next-most-chatty customers (telling an average of 6.86 people, with a median of 6) were those who were satisfied even though the restaurant offered a low degree of correction and the experience was negative.

Satisfied customers. In contrast to the talkative behavior of the people who had a negative experience and were still satisfied despite a low degree of correction, those who had a *positive* experience and were satisfied despite a low degree of correction told an average of just 4.25 people. The most taciturn were those who were satisfied and had a high degree of correction, regardless of whether the experience was positive or negative. The ones in that category who had a positive experience told only an average of 2.67, and those who had a negative experience told an average of 2.58 people. Thus, among customers who were ultimately satisfied with the complaint remedy, my results show that a low degree of correction leads to more word-of-mouth communication, particularly when paired with a negative experience.

Dissatisfied customers. Among the dissatisfied customers, the group who reported a negative experience despite high correction told the fewest people afterward (an average of 2.50). Consistent with the pattern among the high-correction groups noted above, a low correction ending in a positive experience led to slightly more word-of-mouth communication (an average of 5.53 people told) than did a low correction with a negative experience (an average of 4.26). Since I did not ask respondents about the content of the comments that they made to family members and friends, I can only speculate that this set of findings could be a result of service providers' making every attempt to remedy the service failure for the customer, but still not being able to satisfy the complaint appropriately. If that is the case, the resulting word-of-mouth activity could be a function of the customers' recognition of the recovery attempts, despite the restaurants' inability to ultimately satisfy them.

Another significant combination of variables involved the word-of-mouth activities correlated with the correction outcome and intent to re-

turn.³⁵ This set of relationships shows that the way the complaint was handled together with whether the customers intended to return to the restaurant led to different word-of-mouth communication patterns.

Point of no return. Regardless of whether they felt that their experience was positive or negative, customers who indicated that they did not intend to return to the restaurant engaged in more word-of-mouth communication on average than did those who would return. Indeed,

Customers who have given up on your restaurant are far more likely to tell people about their bad experience than are those who will return.

those who permanently walked despite a positive experience and high correction were the most talkative of this group, telling an average of 12.32 people (with a median of 4). Respondents who reported low correction but had a positive experience anyway told an average of 7.79 people. Those who were underwhelmed entirely, with low correction by the restaurant and a negative experience, told an average 6.92 people. Customers who had a negative experience even though the restaurant offered high correction related their tale to an average of 4.33 people.

We're baaack. Customers who intended to return to the restaurant did not engage in as much word-of-mouth communication as those who were not planning a return visit. The noisiest among these customers were those who saw a low degree of correction and had a negative experience (telling an average of 5.81 people). Faithful customers who had a positive experience despite low correction efforts told an average of 2.27 people, and those who saw high correction and had a positive experience told an average of 1.51. Also relatively quiet were those customers who saw high correction efforts but still reported a negative experience (telling just 1.20 people).

³⁵ ($F[3, 282] = 3.93, p = .009, \eta^2 = .04$)

The Importance of Satisfied Customers

The relationship between word-of-mouth activities and the combination of complaint satisfaction and intent to return also was significant in the model.³⁶ In particular, customers who were not satisfied with the complaint remedy and did not intend to return to the restaurant told an average of 11.48 people about their experience, nearly 10 times as many as those who were not satisfied but intended to return to the restaurant

In terms of word-of-mouth communication, restaurant guests react differently to food-related problems than they do to service complaints.

anyway (who told an average of 1.25 people). Customers who were satisfied with the complaint remedy told about the same number of people regardless of whether they intended to return to the restaurant (an average of 4.75 people) or not (an average of 4.12).

A final set of paired relationships—considering the relationship on word-of-mouth activity by the combination of complaint type and intent to return—was not statistically significant in the model. This was the only pair of relationships that did not offer additional explanatory power beyond the main effects.³⁷

Framing Customer Comments

Many people talk about their restaurant experiences. Managers cannot really control what people will say or how much they'll say it. But this study indicates that a restaurateur can influ-

³⁶ ($F[1, 282] = 8.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$)

³⁷ Two of the four possible three-way interactions were also significant in the model, but are not discussed here. One combination is the interaction of complaint type \times experience with correction \times complaint satisfaction ($F[2, 282] = 3.40, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$). The other is experience with correction \times complaint satisfaction \times intent to return ($F[3, 282] = 7.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$). However, several sub groupings in those interactions had either missing cells or cells with few subjects in them.

ence at least the volume of communication by trying hard to remedy problems when they occur. The adage that dissatisfied customers engage in more word-of-mouth communication about their service experiences than do satisfied customers needs to be qualified based on my results, because the data from this sample of restaurant consumers suggests that the relationship between dissatisfaction and word-of-mouth communication is more complex than it at first seems.

To begin with, this analysis indicates that, with regard to word-of-mouth communication, people behave differently after food-related complaints than they do after service-related complaints. Customers talk more about food-related complaints when little is done to correct the problem, but they talk more about service-related complaints when *more* is done to correct the problem. Paradoxically, customers who reported that they were satisfied with the remedies for food-related failures told more people about their experience than customers who were not satisfied. The reverse was true for service-related complaints, where customers who were not satisfied with the complaint remedy told more people than did customers who were satisfied. While my study did not specifically ask respondents to indicate the nature of their subsequent comments, I infer that unsatisfied customers tell negative stories, while satisfied customers might well be singing a restaurant's praises. When customers decide not to return to a restaurant, they will tell more people about their experience if their complaint was not satisfied completely. This study seems to indicate that a restaurateur can minimize customers' word-of-mouth communication by ensuring that their complaint is resolved to their satisfaction *before* they leave.

Although the study found a number of modifications to the idea that unhappy customers tell more people than happy customers do, on balance this study supported that concept. I found that when consumers received a minimal level of correction coupled with a negative recovery experience, they engaged in more word-of-mouth communication than if they received a high level of correction and they viewed the recovery as positive. This suggests that, at a minimum, operators should find out precisely what the cus-

customer will need to be satisfied and, if possible and reasonable, offer the customer a correction that comes as close as possible to that desire (rather than offering something that the customer will view as a standard or inappropriate remedy). For example, offering a customer a free dessert or drink if they do not want one is of little value to anyone—especially if the problem is that the steak is overdone or if the table is collecting dust while customers wait for a check. It's possible that customers will react more positively to a remedy that they feel has been thoughtfully planned for their specific situation, regardless of the magnitude of the correction.

Numbers, Not Content

This study examined only restaurant experiences. The findings reported here might not generalize to other service settings, although it seems likely that this study could apply to other hospitality and tourism settings. Certainly, the complaint categories for this study—that is, food related and service related—won't apply to, say, rental cars or hotels, but those businesses also can make distinctions between products and services. While the food-versus-service division appears to be appropriate for examining complaints in restaurants, it did not take into account that the service failures reported might have involved a combination of food- and service-related issues. Future investigations should sort out those differences.

Possibly the most important limitation is that this investigation measured word-of-mouth communication strictly in terms of the number of people each respondent told about the service failure and remedy in question. While the participants' experiences with the correction were classified as positive or negative based on their critical-incident reports, the content of their word-of-mouth communication was not assessed or recorded. A more complete description of the word-of-mouth data could have been collected if the content of the customers' word-of-mouth communication (positive or negative) was directly measured and assessed along with their description of the complaint experience. Additionally, as noted above, the importance or the severity of the service failure also was not directly recorded. It is possible that the customer's reaction to a service failure might hinge on how important or severe that failure was.

In sum, there is more to word-of-mouth communication regarding service experiences than just the customers' satisfaction with the remedy. While customer satisfaction plays a large role in word-of-mouth communication, it's clear that the number of people whom a customer tells about a service failure and associated remedy depends in large part on the type of complaint, the degree of correction offered, the customer's perception of the complaint's resolution, and whether the customer is planning to visit the restaurant again in the future. ■

Alex M. Susskind, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration (ams76@cornell.edu).



© 2002, Cornell University; refereed article: submitted on July 25, 2001; revisions requested October 23, 2001; accepted with revisions on January 10, 2002.