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AN UNVOICED COMPLAINT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF UNIFI COMPLAINERS AND NON-COMPLAINERS

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ABSTRACT

This study was driven by the interest in marketing. It aimed to explore and better understand the responds styles of complainers, the factors affecting non-complainers to avoid complaining, and the personality traits of complainers and non-complainers. Many studies have been conducted in this area to understand the behaviour of complainers and non-complainers. However, most of these studies were carried out in the Western countries, and only few were conducted in Malaysia. This study aimed to understand why complainers lodge complaint and non-complainers did not voice any complaint to TM.

Keywords: Unvoiced Complaint, Complainers, Non-complainers, Telekom Malaysia Berhad (TM), Marketing.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Telekom Malaysia Berhad or TM, is a leading broadband provider. The company offers a comprehensive range of communication services and solutions including broadband, data and fixed-line. As the market leader, TM is driven by stakeholder values in a high competition environment. TM Group focuses on offering quality customer experience through innovation and enhanced customer service. Attention is also given to improve the operation, to ensure that it is more efficient and effective.

On March 2009, TM began to offer HSSB service to other service provider in order to support Malaysian Government's National Broadband Initiative (NBI) which is designed to make High Speed Broadband (HSBB) service accessible and affordable to the country's citizen. In order to provide a full coverage of HSBB infrastructure, the government has ensured that other telecommunication companies are able to access the HSBB network on fair terms and at a reasonable wholesale price. The government wants HSBB to be a competitive market with healthy competition (MalaysianWireless.com, 2008).

Broadband customers are becoming more demanding and informed about the choices available to them. Many broadband companies in Malaysia are competing at their level best to provide high quality service and excellent customer experience. Despite a very competitive market, the total number of broadband customers in Malaysia grew 6.8% to 1.8 million by year end 2013. At the end of 2013, UniFi had 530,314 customers subscribed to the service (TM Annual Report, 2013). It is not easy to retain the growth as other competitors are also offering broadband service. The growth of UniFi new customers from 2012 to 2013 was only 30%. Hence, this study aims to explore complainers and non-complainers that indirectly affect the growth of customers.

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According to Dacin and Moshe (1997), consumers who address their complaints to the organisation are those who do not involve external sources. Disappointment to complaint to external sources prevents consumers from obtaining compensation, consequently increasing the possibility for continued or increased dissatisfaction. Significantly, the organization risks losing these dissatisfied consumers without understanding the reason for the dissatisfaction, or having the opportunity to correct the problem (TARP, 1986).

Complainer Dissatisfaction

Consumer complaining behaviour is defined as a process that "constitutes a subset of all possible responses to perceived dissatisfaction around purchase episode, during consumption or during possession of goods or service" (Crie, 2003).

Based on this complaining behaviour, it clearly shows that UniFi complainers are part of consumers who naturally want to make complain whenever they are facing service difficulties. Customers have rights to express their feeling towards the company. It is one of the most important forms of customer feedback which can exist in different ways (Heung & Lam, 2003). According to Halstead and Droge (1991), a certain level of dissatisfaction with a product or service must exist before complaining occurs. Consumer dissatisfaction is generally conceptualized as an outcome of a product purchase or usage experience that fails to meet expectations, a condition known as negative disconfirmation. Dissatisfaction occurs if product performance, expressed in terms of product attribute evaluations, is below expectation (Churchill &Suprenant, 1982).

When consumers are dissatisfied with a product purchase or usage attributes, or simply generally dissatisfied, they may act in certain ways. Hirschman (1970) identified "exit" and "voice" as

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common actions. Complainers may no longer use the product or service or communicate his or her dissatisfaction to the seller. Kau and Loh (2006) added that, failure of service providers to act promptly and appropriately will increase frustration leading to dissatisfaction and such will provoke some kind of consumer retaliation which may have detrimental effects to the organization. Hence, according to Bitner, Booms and Tetreault (1990), service failure if it is correctly rectified early often leads to positive reactions from customers. It is interesting to note the paradox that consumers claim that they experience higher satisfaction when successful service recovery has taken place compared to service that has been correctly performed at the first time (McCollough, Berry, &Yadav, 2000).

Word of Mouth

Word-of-mouth (WOM) as part of service failure and customer dissatisfaction often caused complaints and negative word-of-mouth among customers. According to Jansen (2009), the original meaning of the term "WOM" is a process of conveying information from one person to another. In commercial context, negative WOM is regarded as a part of consumers' complaining behaviors. Consumers' complaining behaviors has been studied for decades (Blodgett, Donald, &Rockney , 1993) and (Richins M. L., 1983).

Boote (1998) identifies four types of complaining behaviors: exit, voice, negative WOM, and third-party action. According to Boote, "Exit" refers to a consumer who decides not to buy a product or service again, not to shop at a particular retailer or not to buy from a particular manufacturer again or "voluntary termination of an exchange relationship" (Singh, 1990).

Negative WOM is considered as consumers' private complaining behavior. Singh (1988) suggests a taxonomy of consumers' complaining behavior with three key dimensions: voice

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(redress seeking and loyalty), private responses (negative WOM and exit), and third-party action (legal action and complainer to a consumer organization).

Singh (1990) also proposed a typology of consumers' dissatisfaction response styles, including passives (take no action), voicers (complain actively to the seller), show private responses and activists (engage in formal third-party complaining). Kucuk (2008) argued that Hirschman's theory should be reconceptualised to incorporate the changes in our digitalized society. He suggested that consumer exit and voice can be interpreted as strong indicators of increasing consumer power on the Internet (Kucuk, 2008).

As there are many other providers that offer High-Speed Broadband service, the researcher would like to broaden the research to correlate subscribership that includes measure of cable system quality and perceived benefits.More significant, in reaction to reportedly high subscriber churn or turnover rates and the prospect of local market competition.The focus of this research is to examine factors affecting subscribers' satisfaction and decision to maintain or discontinue UniFi service.

LaRose and Atkin (1988) attempted to predict subscribers' intention to disconnect with satisfaction, media market, home video, and demographic variables. Differing to Umphrey's (1989) findings, the cost of cable service was unrelated to the intention to disconnect. In this case, satisfaction comes in as emerged predictors of intention to disconnect. The items would be the value of UniFi service, customer service, and past experience complaining behavior. Maybe, the complainers were more likely to disconnect than non-complainers.

This finding however could not be used to explain UniFi's subscribers complaining behavior displays, their overall satisfaction with the service and intention to disconnect. There are also questions such as: How extensive is complaining among UniFi subscribers? How do complainers

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differ from non-complainers in their awareness of UniFi service? These questions can only be answered by pursuing this research at the consumer level.

TM would lose its revenue when consumers switch, exit or boycott UniFi service. These actions also do not provide TM with any marketing information on which to plan for the future. According to TARP 1986, while consumer exit is bad for the organization, the effects of negative word of mouth are potentially more harmful as it can influence other people. As with exit, the organization may not realize that it has a problem, and may not understand the reason for a drop in their sales statistics. Again, the organization obtains no long term market information.

Given the significant of these complaint behaviors, scholars (Fornell&Wernerfelt, 1987; TARP, 1986) suggest that the best approach for an organization is to encourage complaints to the organization. In addition to the consumer's benefits, the organization also gains from voiced complaints. At the very least, when a consumer uses an external source to complain about a product or service, the organization becomes aware of the dissatisfaction. Consequently, this is an opportunity for the organization to both solve the consumer's problem and receive valuable information about problems that might impact future consumer satisfaction. By voicing a complaint, the consumer is signalling the need for the organization to address dissatisfaction. Research has also shown that consumers who complain are more organization loyal than those who never voice a complaint to the organization, regardless of whether the complaint is handled satisfactorily (TARP, 1986).

Nevertheless, the researcher believes that by encouraging complaints are just not enough. TM also needs to handle the complaints appropriately. A key construct in most complaint management situation is the communication between the consumer involved and the

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organization (Garrett, Meyers and Carney 1996). The perceived potential for resolution understands why consumers choose specific complaint behaviors, mainly those who do not involve the direct voicing complaint to TM. However, based from Singh's typology, it provides the organization with this information. Based on this information, TM can carefully manage consumer complaint behaviour and their complaint responses, which may result in higher consumer satisfaction. The researcher will then demonstrate how proper understanding of the nature of various types of complaint behaviour can be used by managers to encourage more UniFi non-complainers to voice their complaint directly to TM.

Problem statement

Many Malaysian Telecommunication companies including TM are concerned with dissatisfied customers who have issues with the services provided. TM strives to understand consumers' complaints that are transmitted through multiple platforms including phone calls (100), website, touch-points (TMpoint, Mobile Unit, Authorized Dealer, Reseller) or TM's personnel. These UniFi complainers and non-complainers are important because they may decide to end their relationships with the companies and influence others to do the same (Tax, Stephen, Stephen, &Chandrashekaran, 1998).

Brand switching is the last thing that each service company wants to happen. This is a problem that is bothering the service company since other competitors are offering more or less the same service or package at competitive price. Unfortunately, according to Singh and Wilkes (1996), there are not many studies that address this problem. In reaction to the local market competition, this study attempts to understand the complainers and non-complainers of UniFi service customers.

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This study aims to understand the complainers and non-complainers of UniFi service customers who experienced failures in services provided by TM. The objectives of this study are:

i.   To understand the responds style of complainers.

ii.   To analyse the factors affecting non-complainers to avoid complaining.

iii.   To evaluate the personality traits of complainers and non-complainers.

2.0   METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative method to gather data through focus group interview. The researcher formed two groups of 20 respondents, each group respectively comprises of 10 respondents who were complainers and non-complainers. To determine the sample, phone calls were made to the list of UniFi customers which who were randomly selected and provided by TM.

Quota Sampling was used to make certain that the demographics resembled the regional population and to ensure an adequate sample of complainers and non-complainers. Consumers who have experienced service failures were selected and asked whether they have lodged complaint or not to TM. And then the selected consumers were categorised into complainers and non-complainers groups with the same percentage of respondents. They were selected because they are currently using UniFi service. After the end of the interviews, tokens of appreciation were given to the participants. Table 1 illustrates details of the participants.

UniFi Complainers			UniFi Non-Complainers		
Gender	Level of Education	Age	Gender	Level of Education	Age
Male	Post-graduate	34	Female	School Leaver	30
Male	Undergraduate	27	Female	Postgraduate	32
Female	Undergraduate	26	Female	Undergraduate	27
Female	School Leaver	22	Male	Postgraduate	37
Male	Post-graduate	34	Male	Undergraduate	30
Male	Undergraduate	27	Male	Undergraduate	25
Female	Post-graduate	40	Male	Undergraduate	33
Female	Undergraduate	32	Female	School Leaver	25
Male	School Leaver	24	Female	Post-graduate	28
Female	School Leaver	29	Male	School Leaver	36

Table 1: Details of participants.

In this study, anonymity is guaranteed for all participants in order to establish willingness to participate. The interview sessions were conducted at TM Tower and each session took 20 to 30 minutes to complete. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia then transcribed and translated in English.

In order to gain insights about complainers and non-complainers, the researcher incorporate semi-structured interview questions with a number of open-ended questions to determine the demographic background of the respondents. Aberbach and Rockman (2002) stated that, the use of open-ended question does increases the validity of the responses and is appropriate for study of an exploratory nature. The questions have been used to determine the responds style of complainers (Voorhees, Brady & Horowitz, 2006). The questions were developed based on the research objectives which are; (i) To understand the responds style of complainers; (ii) To analyse the factors affecting non-complainers to avoid complaining; and (iii) To evaluate the personality traits of complainers and non-complainers.

4.0   RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results and discussion of this study are presented based on the three research objectives.

4.1   To understand the responds style of complainers

Singh (1990), argues that one of the elements of customer response style is highly affected by the characteristic of customers who are passive or active. Customers who are active, are normally complainers, they would generally believe that complaining will help them to resolve their problem. While on the other hand, the non-complainers are generally passive customers, they also believe that by complaining will not get their issues rectified.

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One of the respondent informed, "Of course, everyone should complaint to TM so they can improve the service connectivity." This shows that this respondent is an active customer and the respondent believes that by doing so the organization can improve their services. While on the other hand, one of the respondents, who is a passive customer told that "I never think complaint is the best action, I feel the complaint would have gone in one ear and out the other." This respondent believes that complaining will not help to rectify the issue.

The next element in customer response style model as suggested by Sigh (1990) is irate. These customers would spread their experience with the service through word-of-mouth. They would not necessarily giving feedbacks to the service provider but instead, they spread their bad experience to family members and friends which the organisation has no control over. This is one of the most dangerous response styles because it will tarnish the reputation of the product and services provided. Based on our findings, both complainers and non-complainers perform this kind of response style.

According to one of the complainers "Definitely not, I had miserable experience with UniFi and I don't want others to experience the same." This shows that although this respondent does give feedback to the organisation, but he still spread negative word-of-mouth to family and friends. One of the non-complainers also shared the same sentiment. "I don't feel like recommending it, promoting or anything, I'm just not into this." This shows that whether the customer complaint or not to the organisation, they would still spread negative word-of-mouth to others.

The willingness to complaint among customers is highly affected by the desire to lodge complaint. Majority of the complainers are driven by the perception that the organisation has a

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dedicated team to listen and record all complaints and assist to resolve their issues. While for the non-complainers, they do not have the desire to complaint because they feel that complaining is a hassle and they do not want to go through all the steps before they can officially lodge complaint. Work commitment, is also found to be one of the factors leading to non-complainers.

One of the complainers informed that "Yes, since there are dedicated channels that are ready to listen to our problems." This complainer is motivated to complain because he believes that there are people who are ready to listen to his problems and help him to resolve it. On the contrary, one of the non-complainers said that, "I guess I won't do also. It's quite boring to go through all steps before I can officially complain." The researcher believes that time and money are contributing factors that lead to non-complainers. This is in line with the cost and benefit theory which will be discussed later.

Last but not least, according to Singh (1990), activists are customers who would go the extra miles to make sure that complaints are being well entertained. The researcher found that this response style only applies to the complainers. Complainers who have lodged complaints and are not entertained or satisfied with the way the organisation handle their complaints, would go another step further by involving a third party. This third party could be the higher management of the organisation, public attorney, or NGOs (Non-Government Organisation) such as Tribunal of Consumer Claims Malaysia. The researcher also found that complainers who are dissatisfied with the way organisation handle their complaints would post negative comments on social media and make it viral.

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One of the respondents said that "I will write a letter or email to the management if none of my issue is managed properly." Another respondent said that "Maybe writing a complaint letter about the service and send it to the press." Last but not least, one of the respondents said that he would post negative comments on the social media.

4.2   To analyse the factors affecting non-complainers to avoid complaining

According to the Cost and Benefits theory, there are several factors that may hinder customers from complaining. The first factor is useless, the most common factor which leads customer not to complaint because they feel that it is useless, due to the perception that their complaint will not be entertained and will do nothing to help them to resolve their problems. This relates to the model suggested by Singh (1990).

For complainers, they feel that it is necessary to complaint. According to one of the complainers, "I'm sure they will entertain complaints. Complaints do matter for internet service providers." On the other hand, one of non-complainers believes that "I don't think so, because many issues are not being attended accordingly."

Another factor that leads customers not to complaint is influence of others. Malaysians are part of the collectivist society, and they can be easily convinced by their surroundings. What other people think is important to them. Hence, influence of other individuals including family members, relatives, and friends would give effect to whether or not that particular customer complaint. The researcher found that this factor only applies to non-complainers. Most of them are not encouraged by either by family members or friends to lodge complaint. Based on this finding, we can assume that Malaysians collectively are not a complaining society.

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One of the non-complainers said that "There are few people such as my spouse. They think complaining would give problem to other people."

Based on the discussion, it is important for the organisation to receive complaint from customers. However, complaints that are not managed properly will resolve in dissatisfaction which is harmful to the organisation. Based on Singh (1990), dissatisfied complainers will irate by spreading negative word-of-mouth to others. This can also takes place on social media. The negative word-of-mouth will definitely tarnish the organisation's reputation.

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One of the complainers told that "Yes, I had experienced it once. No action taken after I lodged complaint about service interruption."

Spending time and money to lodge a complaint can be one of the determining factors that lead to whether or not a customer lodges a complaint. Complaint is more valuable to the organisation not the customers. Organisation can use complaints to further enhance the quality of their products and services. Hence, increasing sales and profits. Customers on the other hand have to spend time and money to lodge complaints without knowing whether their complaints will be handled properly by the organisation.

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One of the complainers informed "Yes, at least I have made my complaint so that they can improve better." On the contrary, one of the non-complainers told that "It's not worth at all."

Knowing the channel to complaint is important because most of the respondents who do not complaint mentioned that they do not know where to channel their complaints. It is very demotivating for the customers which resulted in them not complaining, and this is considered as a waste to the organisation. While on the other hand, most of the complainers told that they know where to channel their complaints.

"Yes I do, we can call 100, official website, and the social media," answered0 one of the complainers.

While one of the non-complainers answered "Not sure about it because I never complaint anything to TM."

Money is not the only cost that consumers have to spend to complaint to the organisation. Time is also valuable that customers have to put out to lodge complaints. Most of the respondents who have made complaints stated that they have to spend their time to call customer service to lodge complaints. As for non-complainers, it is just a matter of perceived stereotyping. The researcher believes that this is the result of bad experience told by the complainers through negative word-of-mouth.

One of the complainers informed "Yes, I think so especially when the line is busy. Maybe the operators are engaged at that time." The non-complainer told "Longer time needed I guess."

The researcher also asked the respondents to state other factors that could hinder customers from complaining. It is very interesting to find out that time and effort are the most talked about factors. However, one of the respondents said that "The company doesn't really encourage customers to lodge complaint." The researcher believes that this is due to the lack of education on how to lodge complaint. The organisation seems to discourage consumers from lodging their complaints. Interesting enough, that particular respondent suggests that the company can reward customers. The respondent said that "Less encouragement from the company. Perhaps they could reward customers who lodge complaint as token of appreciation for complaining to TM."

4.3   To evaluate the personality traits of complainers and non-complainers

Based on the findings, the study found that the customers have high self-efficacy in lodging complaint to ensure their issues are being resolved. Ten responses from customers whether they can solve their service failure by complaining, this is what they say 'definitely, it would help us to make sure our issues rectified'. Others responded that 'Yes, better to lodge complaint to ensure all issue corrected'. However, the rest would say 'not sure about this because most of the complaints were not being fixed accordingly'. Four of them were unsure about this as other answers would be 'perhaps, if the company has initiated 100% guaranteed to resolve. The study also identified that six of them were not confidence with lodging complaint to TM would make any difference.

Next is the Machiavellianism, where the respondents also showed that customers need some benefits from the company. Reason being, by having some token of appreciation such as rebates, discounts, free merchandise and compensation, they believe that customers would be loyal to the company. "I strongly believe that by having this initiative, it would encourage consumers to

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complaint." Other customers said "Company should offer such benefits to appreciate customers and retain them. The study also sees that customers would be much happier to lodge complaint which would benefit the company. However, the other respondents think that the company should promote the benefits openly. Other respondents told "It should be in the marketing effort plan to enhance customer experience. There were customers saying that they didn't know anything about the token and perhaps it can be shared and increase the number of complaint that would benefit the company."

5.0 CONCLUSION

In today's service industry, businesses have place greater emphasis on long term relationship with customers. UniFi complainers and non-complainers were chosen for this exploratory study in an attempt to answer three research questions to understand the respond styles of complainers, to analyse the factors affecting non-complainers not to complaint, and to examine the personality traits of complainers and non-complainers.

Based on the findings, it was observed that the service provider needs to focus and manage the two groups of UniFi complainers and non-complainers effectively in order to deliver service quality and enhance customer satisfaction. Planning and execution of service recovery needs to be properly managed by respective team to ensure customers remain with the company. Service recovery refers to the actions an organisation takes in response to a service failure (Gronroos, 1988).

In response to this, the researcher suggests that the service provider should educate customers about how important it is to lodge complaint. By doing so, TM will understand the issue pattern and try to come out with solution.

The findings indicate that majority of the respondents believe that the process to lodge complaint involves too much of hassle, as they need to undergo several procedures before a complaint can be made. They also lack knowledge on the channels that can be used to lodge complaint.

Therefore, the researcher would like to suggest two main solutions for this problem. First, is to simplify the phone call procedure, by changing the number to the first number (no.1) after the listening to voice operator instruction. This can help customers to quickly lodge their complaints.

Second, is to improve the visibility of complaint platforms. With the continuity and extensive promotion on the platforms offered such as 100, website, and social media, customers would be better informed and know where to lodge complaint.

As a service provider, TM should know what exactly customers think about their services. This is what we consider as enhancing customers' experience. The process that they can do is by sending short message system (SMS) via phone sending surveys to ask them whether they are satisfied with the service. If customers rate the company the lowest, a complaint officer has to quickly make a phone call to ask them how he or she can assist them. This is what we call as mitigation plan.

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