



# Customer Relationship Management in Public Transportation: A Comparative Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Customer complaint behavior (CCB) is an unlikely predictable sequence of actions and reactions a person goes through in case of a service failure. Yet a number of studies have raised the issue on the pattern of CCB and have even revealed some regularities on this matter. This article is dedicated to verify one of such patterns attributed to the public transportation services, while replicating the research methodology in a different contextual environment. We see how does the sequence of complainer's actions change based on the individual's perception of the cost of complaint, personal competences and the contextual resources that influence the complaint process. Research results have enabled to confirm the probability of a complaint reaction by categories, while the detailed pattern of CCB was partly confirmed.

**Keywords:** Service Management, Public Transportation, Service Quality, Customer Complaint Behavior, Behavior Pattern

**JEL Classifications:** H42, L84, M310, R410

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Back in 2008-2009 Professor Dr. Bo Edvardsson and Dr. Bard Tronvoll have supervised a research project on "customer complaint behavior (CCB) and complaint handling" at the Service Research Centre of Karlstad University, a study financed by VINN Research Excellence Centre. One of the research findings was the pattern of CCB in public transportation, drawn from the questionnaire survey conducted in the city of Karlstad, Sweden (Activities Report for SAMOT, 2010; Mikhaylov et al., 2009). The identified pattern suggests a sequence of customer's actions and reactions undertaken in case of engagement in a complaint process. Meanwhile the CCB is argued to be relative to a number of factors clustered under the categories of cost, contextual resources and customer's competences. Substantial impact of contextual, cultural and socio-economic factors on CCB presume that the proposed pattern might be disproved, while applied in a different region or country. Thus, a comparative study on verification of this theoretical construct in a different socio-economic environment appears to be a challenging research objective.

## 2. CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT: A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF CCB

Customers' complaints, just as feedback, are regarded as an integral part of the customer relationship management and a valuable piece of knowledge for a quality assessment process (Anton, 1996; Bruhn and Georgi, 2006; Grönroos, 2000; Tax et al., 1998; etc.). However, unlike the broad interpretation of the notion of feedback, customer's complaint is a clear indication of a service failure. Actions taken by a customer towards resolution or avoidance of a problem that occurred due to a negative service experience are defined as CCB (Edvardsson et al., 2005; Day and Landon, 1977; Hirschman, 1970; Stephens, 2000; Richins, 1983b; 1987; Singh, 1988). It is evident, that the customer's judgment on whether the negative critical incident lies outside the virtual zone of tolerance is highly subjective (e.g. Mikhaylov and Mikhaylova, 2014). However, Tronvoll (2008) suggests, that there is a certain logic of how customers express their negative impressions, which

is dependable on the level of dissatisfaction with a service. The complaint process being context sensitive places an accent on the surrounding resources, such as time, money and complaint channels, their availability, as well as the social, cultural and situational aspects (ibid.).

According to the broad literature review (Antonides and van Raaij, 1951; Craig-Lees et al., 1995; Goodwin and Verhage, 1990; Granbois et al., 1977; Granbois, 1993; Gronhaug and Zaltman, 1981; Hirschman, 1970; Lovelock et al., 2001; Richins, 1982; Richins, 1983a; Singh, 1991; Slama and Terrel, 1991; Zemke and Schaaf, 1989), all of the possible factors that are influential for CCB decision making can indeed be summarized into the following categories:

- Cost - The perceived amount of effort required in relation to the expected utility or probability of success (i.e., the perceived likelihood of recompense and potential gains); availability of alternatives and the cost of exit;
- Competences - The customer's sufficient ability to formulate and express the backbone of the problem and undertake a complaint action; the ability to assess questionable attribution of blame in the given situation, customer's uncertainty, assertiveness and other demographical, psychological and personal traits;
- Context - The availability of a complaint channel and resources, including those provided by the company (i.e., the aspects of entry threshold or the opportunity); the impact of cultural and social norms often reflected in the "making trouble" perception.

These factors influence customer's decision over the complaint intention. Nevertheless, the question is what are the possible actions to be undertaken during the CCB process? Over the years, scholars developed a vast variety of typologies that indicate alternatives to express dissatisfactions (Crie and Ladwein, 2002; Singh, 1988; 1990; Krishnan and Valle, 1979; Mason and Himes, 1973; Pfaff and Blivice, 1977). Hirschman (1970) proposed one of the earliest classifications of CCB. His model suggests three types of action: Exit the relationship with the service provider, voice the complaint, and a humility coupled with decrease in the service usage due to a considerable level of loyalty. Day and Landon (1977) distinguished no action and action, further subdivided into private and public action. Singh (1988) additionally indicates three types of response - made in private, to the service provider or third party. Richins (1983a) postulates the following activities: Switch, make a complaint to the company, and spread the negative word-of-mouth (WOM). Wirtz and Mattila (2004) have specified a private complaint by allocating interactive (e.g. direct face-to-face) and remote (e.g., written) complaint channels. Atalik (2007) advocates classification of four basic courses of action available to dissatisfied customers: No action, a complaint to the company delivered in one way or another, an overt action with a third party, defect and engage in a negative WOM.

Apart from the CCB classifications, researchers highlight the following consistent patterns that are suggested to be found in the service research. Blodgett and Anderson (2000) found that customers who suspect that the problem could have been

prevented and is likely to occur in the future are prone to switch service provider instead of engaging in a complaint process. Redress-seekers are generally eager to receive financial compensation for the critical incident they have experienced (Deutsch, 1975), thus this type of complainers use interactive complaint channels (Wirtz and Mattila, 2004). This complaint strategy enables the person to clarify matters, explain a situation in detail, use body language and show emotions (e.g. anger, frustration, and urgency), which may lead to a faster resolution of problem (Kaufman, 1999). Customers who desire to vent their frustration do not expect nor desire any reply (Allicke et al., 1992; Nyer, 1997; 1999), hence the complainer may want to remain anonymous and use remote complaint channels (Wirtz and Mattila, 2004; Stiles, 1987). While those familiar with modern technologies and of upper-middle income are more likely to use non-verbal communication channel, such as e-mail, letter, etc., since they view complaining as time-consuming (Barnum and Wolniansky, 1989; Burgoon et al., 1990; Mehrabian, 1981; Mikhaylov and Mikhaylova, 2015).

The original study on the pattern of CCB in public transportation, held in Sweden by Mikhailov and colleagues (2009), suggests that complainer has a choice of an eight-stage complaint process (authors' note: With regards to the urban transportation) with each subsequent stage being characterized by an increased cost due to required inputs. Hence, the probability of a customer exiting the complaint process also increases. The proposed pattern of CCB has a sequence of actions and reactions, where actions are the customer's efforts aimed at informing the service provider about the problem and reactions are the response to an unresolved problem on behalf of the company, including the exit option. To summarize the proposed pattern, here are the stages the customer has to go through to make a complaint in urban transportation services, while influenced by the factors of cost, contextual resources and personal competences (ibid.):

Action Stage 1: Verbal communication; voice a complaint to the service provider, accompanied by a negative WOM to relatives and friends;

Reaction Stage 2: Exit or switch to another means of transportation;

Action Stage 3: Written communication (i.e., email);

Reaction Stage 4: Exit or simple decrease in loyalty (i.e., decrease in usage, reconsider the attitude towards the service provider);

Action Stage 5: Bypass frontline employees (i.e., voice the complaint to the company's office);

Reaction Stage 6: Exit or a public complaint (e.g., authorities, internet community);

Action Stage 7: Physical action (i.e., violence) or written complaint (i.e., letter or fax);

Reaction Stage 8: Exit or an official claim to an organization for the protection of consumers' rights.

Meanwhile we are eager to test the proposed pattern of CCB in public (i.e., urban) transportation by replicating the research methodology in a new contextual environment.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a questionnaire survey held between the months of May and July 2014 in the city of Kaliningrad, Russia. The respondents were asked to evaluate a series of questions on the scale from 1 - least likely, to 7 - most likely, which include: The factors of dissatisfaction, probable complaint reaction and the perceived barriers of CCB. Additionally the questionnaire included a real incident question of an open-ended format, offering the respondent to describe in detail the issue and the actual reaction. Questions on the personal data of respondents included the gender, age, education, profession, availability of a car or a bicycle, frequency of bus usage and the main reason for using public bus transport, prior experience and the income level. Similar questions on demographic factors and personality traits were asked in the original study.

Similar to the original study, we have used a formula of Anton (1996, p.89), in order to determine the sufficient sample size of the population:

$$\text{Sample size} = 2500 * N * (1.96)^2 / (25 * (N-1) + 2500 * (1.96)^2)$$

Where:

N: Total population (population of Kaliningrad is 433.5 thousand pers.).

(1.96): The confidence coefficient: Z-score.

Using this formula in the sampling process, we have ensured the sample size of 384 respondents, giving the research results a 95% confidence interval that the whole population of Kaliningrad city share the opinion of the respondents, while minimizing occasional results to just 5%. The respondents are current users and customers of the public bus companies based in the city, which is ensured by the respective questions.

### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The survey covered all popular urban bus routes of the city: No. 27, 21, 36, 35, 5, 44, 17, 11, 7, 32, 28. Of the 384 respondents

participated in the survey, an almost equal distribution of men and women was achieved, while the age diversity was from 13 to 77 years. Nearly half of the respondents use urban transportation services on a daily basis - 39% and another 30.5% several times a week, which is showing the awareness and, possibly, the loyalty of the customers to this service. Among the major reasons for using public transport were stated in order of frequency, (1) a place of work, indicated by nearly half of all respondents, (2) a place of study, and (3) leisure. While 44% of passengers are people with income level below the regional average (44%) and a further 30.5% with an average income, which might affect the reasons for engaging in a complaint behavior (e.g., recompense). Moreover, just 31% of respondents have a car and 24% - A bicycle, as an alternative means of transportation.

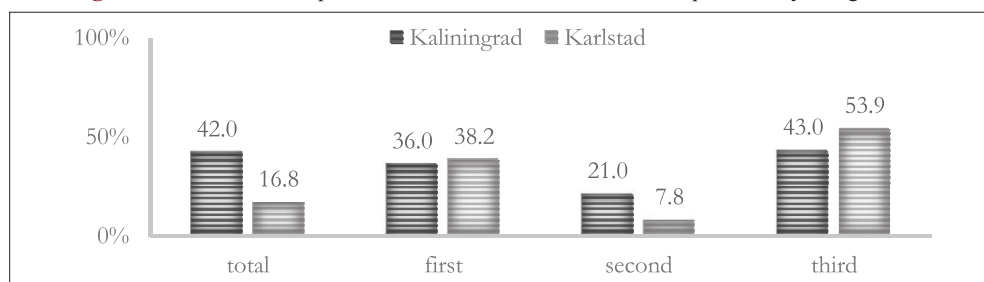
Based on a real incident question (open-ended question), 42% of respondents have experienced one or more negative critical incidents using public transportation services in the city of Kaliningrad over the last 12 months. All of the described situations are grouped into the following three categories based on the problem's core:

- First: "Problems associated with persons" (36% of respondents), predominantly the intolerable behavior of conductors and bus drivers;
- Second: "Problems associated with machinery" (21% of respondents) - dirty or broken vehicles, unbearable on-board temperature, few buses designed to carry passengers with disabilities, irritating on-board advertising, etc.;
- Third: "Problems associated with the service provision" (the most frequent category of problems - 43%) - violations of the schedule and the route, a long waiting time, overcrowding during peak hours, a systematic decrease in the number of buses in the evening, inconvenient location of bus stops, etc.

In Karlstad a vast majority of respondents - 83.2% had not encountered a service failure within the last 12 months. However, some of them claim that they have witnessed problems of other passengers, which influenced their perception over the quality of the service provision. Comparison of the problems encountered by respondents in Kaliningrad and Karlstad are presented in Figure 1.

Although the share of respondents who have encountered a service failure out of the total population of respondents was different in Kaliningrad (42%) and Karlstad (16.8), their reaction was fairly similar - up to 80% of respondents (depending on the problem) in both cases did not engage into a complaint behavior.

**Figure 1:** Distribution of problems revealed in the real incident question, by categories, %



**Figure 2:** The pattern of customer complaint behavior in public transportation based on passengers' evaluation over the possible modes of complaint in the event of a negative critical incident

<b>Stage 1</b>		
<b>Verbal complaint (face-to-face)</b>		
<b>Action</b> Frontline employee	<b>Reaction</b> Family and friends	
<b>Stage 2 (Reaction)</b>		
Silence / loyalty (no action)		
<b>Stage 3</b>		
<b>Remote complaint channel</b>		
<b>Action</b> Phone the company	<b>Reaction</b> Write about what happened on the Internet	
<b>Stage 4 (Reaction)</b>		
Decrease in usage, defect, switch		
Switch to other modes of transportation (bicycle, car, taxi)	Avoid travel by public transport	Cut the use of buses / route taxis to the minimum
<b>Stage 5 (Action)</b>		
Written complaint (by post)		
<b>Stage 6 (Action)</b>		
Private complaint (visit company's office in person)		
<b>Stage 7 (Action)</b>		
Written complaint (by email)		
<b>Stage 8 (Reaction)</b>		
Public complaint		
Turn to the authorities (e.g. the city administration, the police, lawyer)	Refer to the organization for the protection of consumers' rights	
<b>Stage 9 (Action)</b>		
Apply physical action (i.e. violence)		

According to the methodology suggested in the original study conducted in Sweden, the pattern of CCB is derived from the responses given to the possible modes of complaint in the event of a negative critical incident in public transportation service (i.e., ranking the probability of the action/reaction type).

Research results suggest that passengers tend to voice their complaint to a frontline employee - the driver or conductor (49.5%), who are aware of the problem and are able to resolve it immediately. The second most common type of reaction is a negative WOM (49%), directed to friends and relatives of the complainer, as well as the internet community (24.2%). However, the distribution of the negative WOM will generally be limited to 1-3 people. In case of a strongly irritated customer, this number can reach up to 10 persons. Over 30% of respondents believe that they would not engage into a complaint, but give an attempt to find an alternative means of transportation (22.4%) or avoid using public transport in the future (19.8%). Only a small proportion of the respondents are willing to file their complaint to the company, or contact the authorities. The most frequently stated methods of filing a complaint are a phone call (27.9%), handwritten complaint (18.5%), and e-mail (14.1%). The revealed pattern of CCB in public transportation services in the city of Kaliningrad is presented in Figure 2.

Thus, Figure 2 shows the sequence of actions and reaction a customer is considering to undergo in order to react on a hypothetical negative critical incident. It is clear that notwithstanding the minor differences between the research results of the two studies, the pattern of CCB in public transportation is generally verified. As it was proposed in the original study, customers tend to resolve the problem using interactive complaint channels (i.e. face-to-face communication) with frontline employees or vent their frustration by engaging in a negative WOM with the family and friends. This fact along with the stages of the “official claim” being far below the behavioral pattern suggests that customers do not consider compensation highly probable, and believe that the problem is likely to repeat in the future. Figure 3 demonstrates the probability of a certain group of actions to be chosen by a passenger in course of a complaint behavior.

It is evident that despite certain differences within each group of actions and reactions, as it is shown in the pattern, the CCB in public transportation shows definable regularity. Customers consider a verbal complaint as the most probable and adequate reaction to a negative service experience on their behalf. On the other hand, the physical action towards employees or other passengers is least likely to occur, and can generally be regarded as deviation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The conducted empirical study on the CCB in urban public transportation has all in all verified the previously elaborated pattern. Despite the differences in the socio-economic environment of the two cities (i.e., Karlstad and Kaliningrad), customers tend to appraise the “Worthfulness” of a certain mode of complaint in a similar manner (i.e., whether a complaint is worth the efforts).

**Figure 3:** Probability of a complaint behavior, by category

<b>Karlstad</b>	<b>Kaliningrad</b>
<b>Verbal complaint</b>	
58.9%	43.6%
<b>Silence / loyalty (no action)</b>	
28.1%	32.3%
<b>Decrease in usage, defect, switch</b>	
26.5%	20.5%
<b>Non-verbal complaint</b>	
20.0%	18.9%
<b>Public complaint (official claim)</b>	
15.8%	14.0%
<b>Apply physical action (i.e. violence)</b>	
14.9%	6.3%

In most cases, the service failure is not considered to be of vital importance, and is perceived to be easily corrected. This fact leads to a high percentage of “Voicers” (49.5%), who speak out their dissatisfaction to the frontline employee while expecting a fast resolution. An equally high numbers of those, willing to share (i.e. vent frustration) their negative experience with family (49%) and friends (48.2%), since this type of complaint requires the least effort, cost and competences on behalf of the complainer. The factor of contextual resources itself suggests that customers have sufficient access to the required means of complaint (i.e., phone, internet, alternative means of transportation, etc.). However, the major influence is placed by the cost of complaint (e.g., time, financial resources) and individual competences, represented by such factors as knowing the complaint procedure, the ability to deliver a claim to the responsible authorities, etc. Hence, although the current study has verified the general pattern of CCB in public transportation, further research has to be conducted as to identify and itemize the cost, context and competence factors that affect the complainer’s decision-making process.

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