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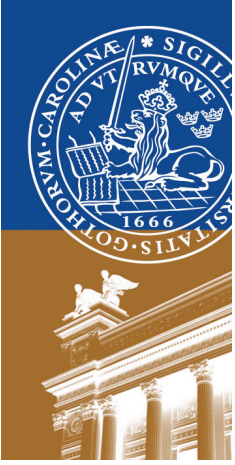
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“The customer is always right”

*A qualitative study of how service-providing
companies deal with public customer complaints filed
on social network sites*

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Abstract

“The customer is always right”: A qualitative study of how service-providing companies deal with public customer complaints filed on social network sites.

Customers have always voiced their complaints, but with the emergence of the Internet and the rise of social media, the medium they used to do so has changed. While beforehand, customers contacted companies through letters or phone calls, nowadays they have the opportunity to raise their voices online and share their dissatisfactions not only with the organisation involved but with their entire network. Therefore, this thesis investigates how service organisations deal with customer complaints filed on social network sites. The focus of this essay was put on the public aspect of social media and how companies handle potential image-threatening posts. This research project was done by observing and interviewing the social media teams of three Belgian service companies. Additionally, the researcher scanned the companies' online activity.

Keyword: Customer complaints, consumer complaints, social network sites, social media, strategic public relations, complaint management

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1. Introduction

“If you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell 6 friends. If you make customers unhappy on the Internet, they can each tell 6,000 friends”

- Jef Bezos

The emergence of social media changed the focus of customer relationship management and gave consumers a new medium to voice their dissatisfaction and complaints. Social media are a game-changing technology with a major impact on business (Corstjens and Umblijs, 2012, p. 433). As mentioned in the introductory quote by Jef Bezos, CEO at amazon.com, the Internet is a potential danger when consumers are handled in a way that leaves them dissatisfied. Customers complaining on social media might think they are always right and expect to be treated accordingly. While before, consumers only had a limited reach by voicing their complaints in letters, phone calls or maybe reader letters in newspapers, nowadays they have the ability to share their negative experiences with the entire world. Consequently, increased uncertainty and more influence sources are a challenge for reputation management (Mandelli, 2010, p.2.) Therefore, organisations should be prepared for consumers raising their voices online.

Complaints filed on social media can be shared easily and consequently companies lose control of opinions that are broadcasted. These developments are potentially harmful to companies because if consumers spread negative messages about a company on the public wall, they might seriously damage the company's reputation (Malthouse et al., 2013, p. 271).

Ryan and Martinson (1980) state that organisations that spend thousands on public relations activities can undermine their own efforts because they fail to develop procedures for responding promptly to complaints (p. 19). As complaints shift from a private forum with one-way communication towards a public forum where complaints can have influence on the company's image, the importance of good complaint management for an organisation's public relation becomes clear.

Demetrious (2001, p. 209) states that the rise of social media might be a pessimistic development for public relations practitioners. The profession of public relations started as a way for an organisation to generate positive publicity by sending out press releases and controlling what appeared in media reports (McElreath, 1997, p. 6; as cited in Demetrious, 2011, p. 209). Current developments in social media shift the power to the consumer as it facilitates the publics in the production and distribution of content to a broader audience (Demetrious, 2011, p. 208).

Due to the emergence of social media, the communication model developed from a one-to-many model to a many-to-many model. This new model allows the customers to express their opinions and allows the company to integrate the feedback into public relations tactics. Through the direct interaction with the

customers, a company shows that its performance is based on the feedback they receive (Kuvykaite and Piligrimiene, 2013, p. 305).

In this context, Prindle (2011) states that in today's conversation economy having meaningful dialogue with customers is crucial to the success of the business (p. 34). Consequently, public relations practitioners are now expected to provide more than just press releases, media exposures and click through-rates. By getting involved in consumer communications through a social media presence and customer relationship management promotions, public relations potentially has a great impact on the business performance (Benjamin, 2011, p. 28). Or, as stated by Jean-Michel Dumont, chairman of Ruder Finn Asia: "The rise of the Internet has blurred the lines between traditional PR, customer service and internal communications. However, messaging remains at the heart of this new paradigm" (Benjamin, 2011, p.28).

1.1. Research questions

Although consumer complaint behaviour with a focus on traditional media such as letters or phone calls has been covered extensively in research, there is a significant lack of academic research on consumer complaints on social media (Corstjens, 2012; Xia, 2013). Furthermore, the point of view of companies about consumer complaints has seldom been investigated.

The main goal of this research is to examine how Belgian service-providing companies react to consumer complaints on social network sites. Social media is an environment where; the borderlines between the private handling of complaints and public campaigning for redress of grievances on the one hand, and between customer relationship management and public relations on the

other, easily fade. The companies that were investigated during this project are Mobile Vikings, Brussels Airlines and ING Belgium.

The overall problem statement directs the project:

How do service-providing companies react to consumer complaints on social network sites?

More specifically the project will be guided by the following research questions:

- Which routines do service-providing companies apply in order to achieve an effective consumer complaint management outcome on social media?
- How do service-providing companies assess and judge the potential impact of consumer complaints on the organisational image?
- How do service-providing companies demonstrate the implementation of complaint management on social media in their strategy?
- How do service-providing companies manage the public aspect of complaints they receive on social networks?

The research method will be twofold, namely by conducting an interview with social media managers of the company and by observing the social media team. Prior to the field research, the researcher will browse through the social media pages in order to get an overview of customer complaints and organisational responses.

2. Literature Review

This literature review will have a limited focus on social media and image building as these disciplines have often been researched in the field of strategic public relations. Because it is a seldom-investigated discipline in strategic public relations, the main focus of this chapter will be on customer complaint management and its dimensions.

2.1. Social media as an image-building tool

Public relations practitioners strive to develop a positive image through direct and indirect communication and organisations are encouraged to use social media to help improve their image.

Twitter and Facebook are effective tools to expand the already existing communication channels (Gilpin, 2010, p. 236). Gilpin (2010) states that adding social media channels as a public relation tool helps to expand the public relations activities to *public relating*, in which the practitioners control and manage the interactions. Additionally, the author claims that they shape the public and professional identity by managing social media (p. 237).

Kuvykaite and Piligrimiene (2013) state that by using these new channels, companies can develop and maintain a positive reputation, which can strengthen consumer trust, involvement and a positive opinion towards their brand. Neef (2003) also acknowledges the importance of a company's online reputation management process. The author mentions that the way a company

behaves online and is perceived by its wider audience is of greater importance than other public relations tactics such as donations to charities, flashy websites or annual CSR reports printed on recycled paper (as cited in Jones et al., 2009, p. 928).

As stated above, social media have an impact on what is said about the company. In order to anticipate and act, the organisation has two options. The company can take a step back and observe, or attempt to influence the consumer's perception (Kuvykaite and Piligrimiene, 2013, p. 306). Uncontrolled social media activity can be threatening to the organisational image, or it can raise new opportunities as a relationship-building tool in a positive approach to the consumer (Kuvykaite and Piligrimiene, 2013, p. 306). Therefore, it is a gamble that each individual organisation may or may not wish to take. Many companies are opting to take this risk as they can provide critical consumers with an immediate answer on social media.

The attributes outlined next can be linked to Davidow's (2003) service recovery efforts explained in 2.2.3. Hart (2011) mentions that members of a social media page want the organisation to act in a conversational and humanistic way. Companies should apply a personal approach and this cannot be done by cutting and pasting responses used for one-way communication onto their social network. The author mentions that by doing so, they just waste their time and recourses with no positive impact on the organisation's reputation. Furthermore, customers expect organisations to be as transparent as possible. If the organisation is not able to reach a high level of transparency,

there is no point in developing a social media strategy. Additionally, by using social media, there should be an increased dialogue between an organisation and its consumers (Hart, 2011).

Finally, the author also states that the speed in which organisations respond is a difficult task to manage. The social media managers should work carefully to be consistent with offering useful information (Hart, 2011, as cited in Byrd, 2012, p. 248).

Therefore, while there are positive and negative aspects to social media, it must be managed delicately to ensure it provides value to an organisation's public relations.

2.2. Consumer complaints

2.1.1. Strategic public relations and consumer complaint management

In 1984, Grunig and Hunt defined public relations as “the management of the communication between an organization and its publics (p.6)”. In this context, Huang (2009) suggests that public relations increases organisational effectiveness by building long-term relationships with stakeholders (p. 2006). Bruning et al. (1999) state that relationship management shifts the practice of public relations away from the manipulation and steering of public opinion towards a focus on building, nurturing and maintaining the relationships between an organization and its public (p. 158). Ehling (1992) characterises these developments as “an important change in the primary mission of public relations” (as cited in Bruning et al., 1999, p. 158). Organizations have three types of relationships, namely professional, personal and community. Each kind of relationship requires specific treatments. In this context, organisations

must note that while managing a community relationship, it is important to be open with the community members (Brunig and Ledingham, 1999, p. 165). In order to have an effective dialogue, organisation should develop practices that facilitate dialogue between the organisation and its publics, which will help to build and maintain the relationships (Brunig and Ledingham, 1999, p. 159).

Consumer complaint management is an important aspect of the management and handling of the organisation-public relationship. Therefore, the next part of this thesis will have a closer look at consumer complaint theories.

Consumer complaints have been defined in many different ways. For example, Barlow and Møller (1996) define a complaint as “a statement about expectations that have not been met” (p.22). Moreover, the authors describe a complaint as “an opportunity for organisations to reconnect with customers by fixing a service or product breakdown” (Barlow and Møller, 1996, p.22). Different authors describe complaints as a valuable gift from the consumer to the company (Barlow and Møller, 1996, p.22; Stichler and Schumacher, 2003, p.14). Barlow and Møller (1996) mention that by listening and responding to the customer feedback, organisations can improve the quality of their services and complaint management can even become the foundation for a company’s service recovery programmes (p. 17).

2.1.2. The disconfirmation paradigm

Many authors use the *disconfirmation paradigm* as an explanation for the reasoning behind consumer complaints (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982, p. 492; Resnik and Harmon, 1983, p. 86; Tse and Wilton, 1988). Resnik and Harmon (1983) described a consumer complaint as a clear manifestation of

dissatisfaction. The authors mention that, although complaints serve as customer feedback about a product, service or company performance, there can be a significant impact on the corporate policy and public relations (Resnik and Harmon, 1983, p. 86).

According to Donoghue and de Klerk (2009), before purchasing and consuming products, consumers form expectations regarding the quality and performance of the products (p.457). Complaining behaviour is a reaction to the disconfirmation of these expectations (Bearden and Teel, 1983; Oliver, 1980, as cited in Dunn and Dahl, 2012, p. 671).

Folkes (1984) claims that what causes a product's failure is the determining factor for the complaining behaviour. Firstly, when the blame is external or due to the company or product, it is likely that the consumer will complain (Donoghue and de Klerk, 2009, p. 458; Folkes, 1984, as cited in Dunn and Dahl, 2012, p. 671). Secondly, when the blame is internal or due to the consumer's use of the product, there will be no increase of dissatisfaction with the product and the consumer will be unlikely to complain (Folkes, 1988, as cited in Dunn and Dahl, 2012, p. 671). Armistead et al. (1995) focus on service failure rather than product failure and identified three types of service failure: service provider errors (i. e. the company caused the problem); customer error (the error is due to a mistake the customer made) and associated organisation errors (e.g. strike of employees).

Donoghue and de Klerk (2009, p. 459) organised the factors influencing consumer complaint behaviour into three categories. The first category describes *consumer-related variables*. These variables indicate characteristics

that are associated with or determined primarily by consumers (i.e. individual factors or internal blame). Characteristics that can be seen as antecedents to complaint behaviour are, among others, demographics, personality factors, attitudes, personal values and culture. Complainers tend to be more self-confident, assertive and in personal control of their life experience than non-complainers (Donoghue, 2009, p. 459). In this context, Goodwin and Ross (1990) claim that younger and better-educated customers are more likely to complain, especially if they believe the problem is important and they will benefit from expressing their complaint (p. 40). Even though Donoghue's study was researched thoroughly, the researcher missed the link to online media. The study could have looked into the self-confidence of complainers when they complain on social media. In addition to the personal traits of consumers, prior experiences can influence complaint behaviour. Moreover, knowledge of unfair practices, consumer rights and where and how to make complaints, affects complaining behaviour (Singh, 1990, as cited in Donoghue and de Klerk, 2009).

The second category describes *product-specific variables*. These variables include, among others, the nature and cost of the product, durability, the importance of the product to the consumer and the dissatisfaction with the product (Donoghue and de Klerk, 2009). Donoghue and de Klerk (2009) mentions that highly priced, complex products with a relatively long life expectancy cause a higher occurrence of complaints (Donoghue and de Klerk, 2009, p. 460).

The final category consists of *redress environment variables*. These variables refer to factors that are controlled or influenced by retailers and they include

perceptions of the retailer's responsiveness to customer complaints (i.e. is the retailer willing to provide a solution for the dissatisfaction?) and the consumer's perceived trouble involved in making a complaint (e.g. time lost or the monetary cost of complaining) (Donoghue, 2009, p. 460).

2.1.2. A consumer complaint behaviour framework

To Hirshman, the first author to conceptualise consumer dissatisfaction in 1970, when there is increased consumer dissatisfaction caused by a decrease in the quality of the product and service, consumers have two choices. Consumers can either choose to *exit*, which occurs when consumers leave the relationship and step over to a competitor or they can choose the second concept, *voice*. Through raising their voices by, among others, complaining, consumers try to restore their relationship with the organisation. Whether the consumer chooses the exit or voice option depends on the loyalty towards the organisation. When there is a higher level of loyalty, the exit option might be reduced (Hirshman, 1970; Sethi, 2010).

Tronvoll (2007, p. 27) schematised the three-level model of Hirschman. In this model, the author suggested that consumer response to decreased quality was a function of certain consumer characteristics and the nature of the industry (Figure 1).

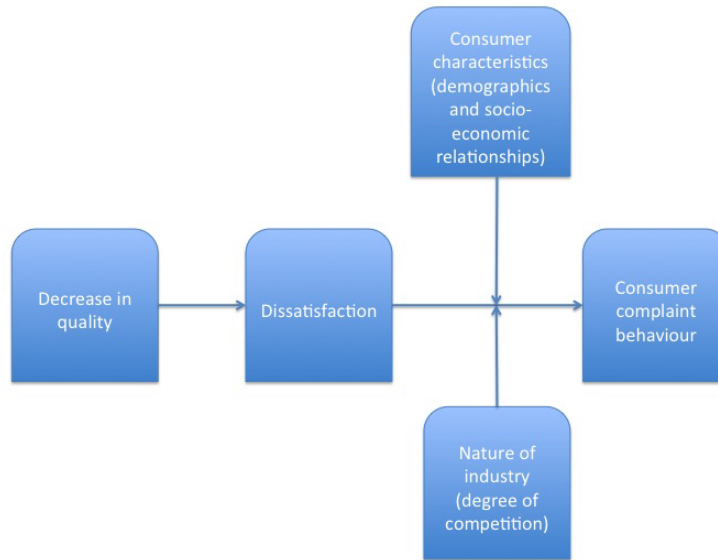


Figure 1: Consumer complaint behaviour (Hirshman, 1970, as cited by Tronvoll, 2007)

Drawing on the typology of Hirshman, Day and Landon (1977) developed a new classification scheme of consumer complaint behaviour. In this two-level hierarchical scheme, the first level consisted of action and non-action. The second level consisted of private action and public action. *Private action* comprises modifying one's own behaviour, influencing friends and family or changing the type of brand and retailer. *Public action* consists of seeking of compensation or redress, or complaining to consumer protection associations (Day and Landon, 1977; Donoghue, 2009; Tronvoll, 2007; Figure 2).

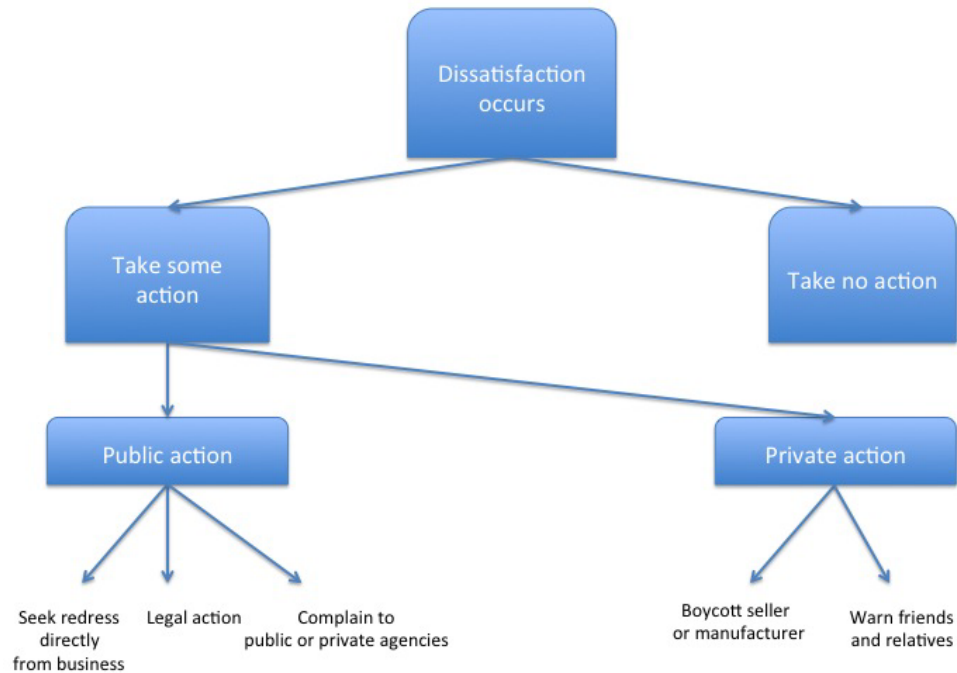


Figure 2: Classification of consumer complaint behaviour (Day and Landon, 1977, as cited by Singh, 1988)

In 1988, Singh proposed a new taxonomy based on the previous model by Day and Landon (1977). The author developed this new classification because there was no real classification for future research. Singh stated that the new taxonomy would be a better representation of reality (Singh, 1988, p. 95; Figure 3). This new taxonomy was based on the object toward which the consumer complaints are addressed. Singh explains the classification as follows: “Voice responses are directed to objects that are external to the consumer’s social circle (i.e. informal relationships) and are directly involved in the dissatisfying exchange (e.g. retailer, manufacturer). The no-action responses are included in this category because they appear to reflect feelings toward the seller. Third party responses include objects that are external to the

consumer but are not directly involved in the dissatisfying transaction (newspapers, legal agencies). Finally, for the private consumer complaint behaviour category, the objects are not external to the consumer's social net and are also not directly involved in the dissatisfying experience (e.g., self, friends, relatives, etc.)” (Singh, 1988, p. 104).

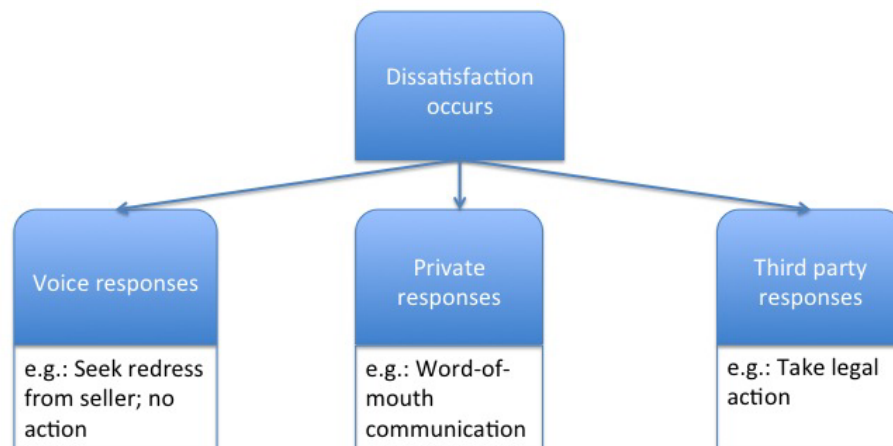


Figure 3: Taxonomy of consumer complaint behaviour by Singh (1988)

2.2. Responses to consumer complaints

2.2.1. An organisational point of view

Service organisations will find themselves in situations where customers are dissatisfied about one or more dimensions of the service quality (Lewis and Spyropoulos, 2001, p. 37). If consumers are not happy with the service the company provided, the organisations risk the loss of the consumer. According to Clark et al. (1992), 52% of the consumers that received no response on their complaints were likely to switch to a competing company (p. 46).

Furthermore, studies show that customers are likely to tell others about their dissatisfaction and thus spread a negative word-of-mouth (Clark et al., 1992, p.

42). In today's online media environment, negative comments are not only limited to the private sphere but existing customers and customers interested in the company might read the comments and consequently change their attitude towards the brand.

According to Prim and Pras (1992, p. 335), organisations have to be aware of complaining behaviour and its consequences for three reasons.

Firstly, complaints give valuable information about the firm's product or service failures. If a consumer never gives any comments, the information necessary for the evolution of the company will not reach the organisation.

Secondly, by complaining, the unsatisfied customer gives the company a chance to defend itself and a second chance to restore the service failure. As a consequence of the organisational response, consumers can possibly still reach satisfaction and can be convinced to trust the services the organisation offers (Prim and Pras, 1999, p. 335; Bolting, 1997, p. 11).

Finally, research proved that when a consumer is satisfied by the response to his complaint, he becomes more loyal than other consumers (Prim and Pras, 1999, p. 335). For these reasons, the authors support companies to encourage their consumers to complain. The main objective in the company's strategy should be to stimulate complaining behaviour in order to collect useful information (p. 335). Moreover, companies should strive to have meaningful conversations with the customers who are searching for help. Professionals can stimulate these conversations by making it easy for the consumer to find the company through their content and to let the customer engage in dialogue (Leary, 2009). Prim and Pras (1999) called the concept of the complaint providing useful information the *friendly complaint*. Here the complaint

reaches its objective (i.e. to be desirable for the organisation), when the quality and the quantity of the information provided by the complaining consumer is sufficient and when the company has a possibility to respond positively and quickly to these complaints. A friendly complaint might turn into the opposite when the company's capacity to respond is weak (p. 340). A poor management of complaints can lead to defections and the company might risk never gaining the customer's trust again. In this context, Clark et al. (1992) state that an organisational response to a consumer's complaint can also be an image-building tool (p.42).

Therefore, companies have to decide clearly how to respond to their consumers. Organisations should see complaints as opportunities to increase the consumer satisfaction. Barlow and Møller (1996) claim that companies should see complaints as gifts; they also mention that the best way to react on a complaint is to thank the customer for taking time straight away (p.21). Companies mostly react by asking questions about the consumers and details about the problems they are facing. By the end of the conversation, the consumer is so overwhelmed by the information that a thank you is often not heard (p. 21). Reichheld and Sasser (1990) mention that by listening to feedback from defecting customers, companies can detect issues easily and solve them before the consumer chooses a different company (p. 105). Consequently, it is important to respond to complaints as it does not only allow companies to fix issues but it can also facilitate positive relationships between organisations and consumers (Prim and Pras, 1999).

Some authors mention the importance of recognising consumer complaint management at a strategic level and listed the key challenges. According to

Zairi (2000, p. 333), most organisations suffer from a lack of systematic approach; they do not recognise the importance of consumer complaints at a strategic level; they are not well equipped when it comes to systems for the logging and processing of complaints; have adverse cultures and too much of *blame and reprimand* practices and they have not embraced the concept of quality management and its related concepts (p. 333). The author states that listening, empathising, innovating and caring can help the organisations to create customer satisfaction out of a defective situation. Zairi used the work of previous authors in order to develop a tool that assists companies with the process of developing a culture that supports receiving, accepting and handling complaints (see Appendix 1) (Zairi, 2000, p. 334).

As mentioned by McCole (2004), a company's service recovery efforts should be considered at a managerial level and there have to be specific guidelines in order to secure good service recovery (p.352). In this context, Cook and Macaulay (1997) state that complaints should be seen as a means to avoid problems and a help to plan for the future. They propose the *empowerment* framework, which encourages service companies to take a positive and proactive approach to handling complaints (p.42). The authors mention that in an empowered organisation, the employees are given the authority and responsibility for serving the customer efficiently (p. 39). The starting point for empowered complaint management is explaining to the employees what authority they have in order to deal with complaints. Additionally, this framework encourages service providers to support complaint managers to take responsibility and to develop skills in handling complaints. Employees need to take action to overcome the causes of complaints and generate ownership of

the improvement opportunities that complaints bring (p. 42).

In this context, Resnik and Harmon (1983) mention it is the task of the marketing manager to define and clarify company attitudes towards complaint handling. In their study they found out that consumers expected an apology or explanation letter while managers preferred to have direct contact with the dissatisfied consumer. Research showed that managers were willing to be more aggressive and direct in the complaint resolution process than consumers expected them to be (p. 92).

Additionally, McCole (2004) states that a manager needs to make sure there are sufficient resources in order to capture and monitor the valuable complaint data (p. 352). Cook and Macaulay (1997) state that applying this framework will not only add value to the consumer but also to the organisational performance (p. 42). In this context, Goodman (2006) states that, although handling complaints might not be the nicest activity to deal with, it is the easiest to translate into improved loyalty, revenue implications and financial payoff.

2.2.2. Service recovery actions

The actions a service provider takes to respond to service failures are defined as *service recovery actions* (Lewis and Spyropoulos, 2001, p. 37). These actions are efforts companies take to return “aggrieved customers to a state of satisfaction with the organization after a service or product has failed to live up to the expectations” (Zemke and Bell, 1990, as cited in Bolkan, 2007). According to Goodwin and Ross (1990), a consumer who feels harmed expects compensation (p. 40). Zemke and Bell (1990) listed the following customer expectations for service recovery: to receive an apology for the fact that the

customer is inconvenienced; to be offered a *fair fix* for the problem; to be treated in a way that suggests the company cares about the problem, about fixing the problem, and about the customer's inconvenience; and to be offered value-added compensation for the inconvenience (as cited in Lewis and Spyropoulos, 2001, p. 39). Goodwin and Ross (1990) state that consumers will evaluate the fairness of the transaction based on whether they perceive this compensation as adequate and appropriate (p. 40).

2.2.3. Dimensions of service recovery actions

Davidow (2003) presented a framework that divides the organisational responses into six dimensions and takes a closer look at their impact on post-complaint behaviour. The next part of this thesis will explain these dimensions and summarise the framework. It is important to mention that, although these dimensions are explained independently of each other, it is unrealistic to keep them separated. It is obvious that there are interactions between some of the dimensions.

2.2.3.1. Timeliness

Davidow (2003) describes timeliness as the perceived speed in which an organisation responds to, or handles a complaint. The literature suggests that a fast response is crucial in effective complaint management.

Clark, Kaminski and Rink (1992) state that the response speed is important only if the compensation is included in the organisational answer. This might be explained by the fact that with a minimum level of redress, the consumer can be so dissatisfied that the response speed is not an issue anymore (as cited in Davidow, 2003, p. 223). Moreover, there was a distinction between a

complaint where monetary loss was involved on the one hand and nonmonetary complaint issues on the other hand. Due to a monetary loss, the consumer expects a financial redress whereas after a nonmonetary complaint the consumer only seeks understanding from the company. This is a completely different frame of mind, and therefore will have influence on the way the consumer perceives the amount of time in which the complaint is resolved as important (Davidow, 2003, p. 223).

Additionally, the author states that consumers are aware of what could be a reasonable waiting time and they expect organisations to need some time in order to investigate the incident. Consequently, timelines will only be a factor after an unreasonable delay. Therefore, organisations need realise that the quick response is not always the best response. Response speed also depends on the context of the complaint and the medium through which a complaint is filed (Davidow, 2003, p. 223).

2.2.3.2. Facilitation

Facilitation is described as “the policies, procedures, and structure that a company has in place to support customers engaging in complaints and communications” (Davidow, 2003,p. 235). The author mentions the importance of encouraging dissatisfied consumers to voice their complaint to the company by introducing clear complaint-handling policies and a consumer-friendly reputation. By making a complaint handling mechanism available, there is a positive impact on likelihood of complaining and a negative impact on negative comments (Richins, 1983, as cited in Davidow, 2003, p. 235). Davidow (2003) stresses the importance of having a good complaint management infrastructure. Consumers need to be informed about the

willingness of the organisation to handle complaints and the company should provide easy guidelines for filing a complaint (p. 235). Nowadays, the importance of this infrastructure has decreased since complaints are often posted on social media.

Moreover, the author mentions that companies need to be willing to adapt their complaint responses according to the customer. Sparks and McColl-Kennedy (1998) stated that neutrality (i.e. treating all the customers in the same way) has a negative impact on satisfaction (as cited in Davidow, 2003). Therefore, flexibility is a necessary feature for facilitation.

2.2.3.3. Redress

Redress is described as “the benefits or response outcome that a customer receives from the organization in response to the complaint” (Davidow, 2003, p. 232). Davidow (2003) states that consumers must at least be returned to the point they were before the dissatisfaction. If this is not possible, they will remain dissatisfied (p. 235). Furthermore, the author mentions that some form of compensation increased the willingness to do business with the company in the future (Davidow, 2003, p. 235). The author warns that firms need to distinguish between partial redress and full compensations. He mentions that partial compensation will not lead to complete satisfaction. On the other hand, it is clear that full redress has a positive impact on post recovery satisfaction (Davidow, 2003, p. 237). Davidow (2003) mentions that customer’s expectations of redress are not always monetary. Therefore, it is important to check with the customer what they expect. Additionally, companies need to remember that redress is not always the first thing consumers have in mind (p. 239).

An organisation must be aware of the three basic principles of redress, which are equity, equality and need. *Equity* means that consumers receive compensation according to their losses. Based on the *equality* principle, all consumers with the same problem get an equal treatment. According to the *needs* principle, the compensation consumers gets depends on their individual needs (Davidow, 2003, p. 240). Companies have to be careful with these principles because when a company responds to a complaint according to the *needs* principle, while a consumer has a treatment according to the equality principle in mind, the dissatisfaction will not disappear.

2.2.3.4. Apology

An apology occurs when the organisation acknowledges the complainer's unhappiness. Davidow (2003) mentions that an apology can never stand alone and must be seen in relation with the other five dimensions. The author also suggests that managers and consumers see apologies differently. Managers would only allow their team to give an apology if they believe the complaint is legitimate whereas consumers expect an apology because it shows courtesy and respect. An apology can show understanding of the dissatisfaction perceived by the consumer without having to admit the mistakes or taking the blame (Davidow, 2003, p. 241). In this context, Xia (2013) calls actions where companies admit their defections and apologise *vulnerable reactions*. The author states that being vulnerable is effective in building brand-consumer relationships because it expresses sincerity and respect. Additionally, consumers might consider it as being more appropriate than a defensive strategy (p. 75)

Baer and Hill (1994) categorise excuses as *linkage* and *valence* excuses. The former consists of three categories, namely denial excuses that try to eliminate the perceived linkage to the problem by denying that the company had to do with it. Secondly, there are deflection excuses that try and place the blame on someone else and finally, explanation excuses try to lower the sense of criticism by presenting details that might decrease accountability. Or as Baer and Hill (1994) state, consumers who receive well-argued explanations from the company after they complained are more likely to be satisfied with the response and they even can see the initial failure as less negative. Furthermore, they are more likely to perceive the company as more credible than consumers who did not receive explanation.

Valence excuses consist of two categories, firstly minimization excuses that aspire to lessen the perceived unpleasantness by suggesting that in some way it was not as bad as previously thought. Secondly, there are justifications that go beyond minimization by asserting that the event was not bad but in some way good and that the customer was better off as a result (Baer and Hill, 1994).

2.2.3.5. Credibility

Credibility is the organisation's willingness to present an explanation of the problem. Consumers want to know the origin of the problem and what the company is going to undertake to prevent the manifestation of the problem in the future (Davidow, 2003, p. 242). Therefore, companies need to be careful in the wording of the response, because consumers highly value the way the complaint is interpreted and explained. The author suggests having simple and clear communications with consumers and organisations should be fair in

investigating and analysing the problem. Sparks and Callan (1995) found that in most cases, explanation had a significant impact on consumer satisfaction and repurchase. On the other hand, redress without any explanation of the failure can be judged as an admission of guilt and consequently reduces satisfaction and repurchase (as cited in Davidow, 2003, p. 242).

2.2.3.6. Attentiveness

The care and attention that the consumer gets from the organisation is labelled as attentiveness. In this dimension, it is important that the consumer gets a personalised response. Attentiveness is built around four areas, namely respect, effort, empathy and willingness to listen to the consumer. In this context, Bitner et al. (1990) clarify that dissatisfaction does not only originate in the failure of the core service, but it can increase by an employee's disrespectful response. Consumers that are treated rudely are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth (as cited in Davidow, 2003, p.244). The author claims that this dimension has the largest effect on consumer satisfaction and repurchase behaviour (Davidow, 2003, p. 244).

2.2.4. *Online consumer complaint management*

Research shows that 70% of the US consumers have visited social media websites to get information about a product before purchasing (DEI Worldwide, 2008). Additionally, Coyle, Smith and Platt state that consumers do not only use social media websites to look for information about the product, but they also communicate with customer representatives (DEI Worldwide, 2008; Coyle, Smith and Platt, 2012, p. 28). Organisations have to be aware that the assessment of the brand's reputation might be based on the

responses they post on social media (Coyle, Smith and Platt, 2012, p. 29).

Lee and Cude (2012) confirm this, as they state that the rise of the Internet did not only enable people to buy a product or a service but it changed the balance of power between consumers and companies (Lee and Cude, 2012, p. 90; Labrecque et al., 2013). Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) state that consumers are increasingly aware of the possibility that a company will read their online posts and respond accordingly. Consequently, consumers do not only post complaints to ventilate negative feelings but also to attract the company's attention (p. 133). The Internet empowers consumers to overcome most of the information asymmetries of the traditional markets. Consumers acquire more power and companies need therefore to develop a strong social consumer relationship management strategy (Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006, as cited in Lee and Cude, 2012, p. 91). Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) state that companies have to be careful in their responses, as a step in the wrong direction may lead to *a spiral of negative effects* where negative feedback leads to even more negative feedback (p. 132). This can be the case when a customer with a lot of influence or followers is dissatisfied about provided services and files a complaint. Companies have to be aware that web care can backfire on a company and undermine its intended effects (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2011, p. 132).

As mentioned above, a key component of a social customer relationship management strategy is having meaningful conversations with customers searching for help (Leary, 2009). Coyle, Smith and Platt (2012) claim that "it is likely that the desire to be treated as we treat others, drives at least parts of

consumers' high expectations when interacting with businesses through social media" (p. 28). According to Dunn and Dahl (2012), technology stimulated the increase in complaining across retail categories. The authors point out that social media have changed the psychology of consumer complaining. There is no longer the threat of social confrontation when a complaint is posted on social network sites. Consequently, the way consumers complain has shifted from a private to a public phenomenon. Dissatisfied consumers will now raise their voice online and they realise that they need to present their complaints as an issue that concerns the fellow and future customers of a firm (Winch, 2011; Ward and Ostrom, 2006, p. 220).

The success of social media when it comes to consumer complaints can easily be explained. Consumers previously preferred to avoid complaining to companies because they believed that doing so would require too much effort and time. However, since the popularity of social media has increased, consumers are able to tweet or file complaints in 140 characters or less. This makes them realise complaining has simplified and gives consumers a chance to approach companies with their dissatisfactions immediately (Winch, 2011). Additionally, Gerstener (2011) mentions that social media can move the private conversation to a public forum, while bringing peer pressure to give consumers a quick response from the organisation. Gerstener (2011) states that the power behind this tactic is that a vast network of people can see the full account of the customer service online. Complaints are no longer only person-to-person, but it has shifted to person-to-network, providing a forum for exponential growth in the negative consequences of customer comments. Consequently, one dissatisfied customer's circle of influence can now reach

unprecedented proportions (Pinto and Mansfield, 2012).

3. Methodology

The aim of this research was to find out how companies deal with possible image-threatening complaints filed on social media. The methods used for this research project were strictly qualitative, because the researcher wanted to reach understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants (Bryman, 2008, p. 366).

The main part of the research took place *in the field* (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.3), as the researcher spent one day at the social media department of three Belgian service-providing companies. This gave the researcher an insight into how social media departments operate. Furthermore, it enabled the researcher to observe how social media managers go about their routines, communication activities and interactions (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 9). Additionally, the companies' social media managers were interviewed on the same day as the observations took place. In order to be well prepared for the field research, the researcher scanned thoroughly through the companies' social media pages.

Focusing on these three companies was a conscious decision as it allowed an in-depth study of these cases (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

3.1. Research sample

In this study, the focus was put on service-providing companies. The sample consisted of three companies active in different fields. In order to be selected for the sample, companies needed to have a clear social media presence. Additionally, companies were required to be large enough to receive complaints on social media. The three companies that collaborated voluntarily are ING Belgium, one of the main banks in Belgium; Brussels Airlines and Mobile Vikings, a mobile network provider. These companies will be presented next.

3.1.1. Brussels Airlines

Brussels Airlines is the Belgian flag carrier airline. The company found its origin after a merger between SN Brussels Airlines and Virgin Express. Brussels Airlines is almost 100% owned by the SN AirHolding and the Lufthansa AG owns 45% of the SN AirHolding (Brussels Airlines, 2014). Being the largest airline based in Belgium, the company operates to more than 60 destinations worldwide and transported nearly 6 million passengers in 2013 (De Morgen, 2014).

In order to inform and communicate with its passengers, Brussels Airlines is actively engaged on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. At the beginning of 2009, the e-Business team initiated the company's presence on social media in order to reach a large proportion of the public, to enhance the word-of-mouth and to encourage dialogue. In April 2009 they developed a Facebook page and later that year, they started being active on Twitter (@FlyingBrussels). Both social network sites are used in order to reach a different goal: Facebook is used as a *fan community* and the main goals are to

announce promotions, information about the company, contests, customer service and (crisis) communication. Twitter is used as a platform for customer service, conversations with the community and (crisis) communication (Brussels Airlines, 2012).

As a consequence of their well-implemented social media strategy, the company had over 11500 followers on Twitter and over 178000 fans on Facebook in May 2014.

3.1.2. Mobile Vikings

Mobile Vikings is a mobile phone operator founded in Hasselt, Belgium in 2008. The company was a pioneer in the Belgian phone market because it offered 1GB of free mobile Internet and 1000 free text messages for a pre-paid top up.

In 2012, Mobile Vikings already has more than 100 000 customers. Unlike other telecommunication providers, Mobile Vikings does not have a big marketing budget, sales teams or flagship stores since everything happens online. Mobile Vikings has a community-driven approach, because its brand was built around the concept of Brand Ambassadors where existing customers are encouraged to convince their friends to become a customer. Another strength of Mobile Vikings is its strong online community that consists of over 46000 fans on Facebook and over 25300 followers on Twitter, where customers are encouraged to help their fellow customers (Thomas Vanhoutte, 2012; Mobile Vikings, 2014). In March 2013, the company slightly adapted its social media strategy. It introduced a system where not only conversation managers and marketers, but also accountants, managers and developers were responsible for the online conversations. The online marketers and helpdesk

employees are responsible during the day and when a customer has a question between eight and ten in the evening, someone else can help them. This makes the company a real *conversation* company where every employee is responsible for a good customer experience (Bloovi, 2013).

3.1.3. ING Belgium

ING Belgium (ING) is the local division of the ING Group. Before it became part of the ING group in 1998, the bank was known as BBL (Banque Bruxelles Lambert). ING has a network of almost 800 branches, of which 230 are run by independent self-employed agents (ING, 2014).

The mission statement on the bank's website states that the customer is the focus of attention in the financial products and services ING offers. The bank aims to deliver exemplary service, maximum convenience and competitive rates (ING, 2014). In 2012, ING started its web care team, which is active on Facebook and Twitter, in order to create an open and direct dialogue. The reason for getting this team started is, as mentioned on their website, that they offer many products and services online. The company wants to improve the quality of the customer service by responding the customer through the same channel (ING, 2014).

In May 2014, the company had over 82400 likes on its Facebook page (ING België and ING Belgique) and over 1163 followers on Twitter (@INGBelgie and @INGBelgique). The company runs two different social media pages, both in French and Dutch. As it is a Belgian company, the researcher combined both pages.

3.1. Exploration of complaint reactions on social network sites

The initial phase of research will be an exploration of social network sites whose primary objective is to provide insights in the way consumers complain and the organisational responses. The researcher aims to find patterns in the consumer complaints and organisational responses. In order to achieve this, the official Facebook and Twitter page of Brussels Airlines, Mobile Vikings and ING Belgium will be explored.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

According to Daymon and Holloway (2011), semi-structured or focused interviews are often used in qualitative research. In contrast to a structured interview, where the questions are to be followed and there is not much space for dialogue, a semi-structured interview allows the participant to ask questions and reply freely to the questions posed (p. 238).

Semi-structured interviews are constructed around an interview guide and the focus is put on the issues to be covered. Despite the presence of this interview guide, the respondent still has the chance to reply according to his own will (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). With this technique, the researcher is not required to follow the order of the questions can ask questions according to the participants' responses. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews mostly consist of "open-ended" questions that are not exactly worded in the same way with each participant. Consequently, participants have the opportunity to respond elaborately and in great detail (Mack et al., 2005, p. 4). The researcher can also ask questions that follow up interviewee's replies (Bryman, 2012, p. 470).

The goal of designing an interview guide is to ensure that similar data is collected from every participant (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 238). For this project, the interview guide was designed around the topics in the research questions. It consisted, among others, of questions about the strategies the companies used in order to monitor complaints, questions about the timeliness of the complaint management (e.g. How much time goes into investigating the problem?), how they assess and judge the potential impact on the organisational image, and about the importance of consumer complaint management for the overall communication strategy.

For this study, the researcher interviewed Kim Daenen, who is social media manager of Brussels Airlines and Frederik Simoen, who is leader of the web care team at ING Belgium. At Mobile Vikings, the researcher asked questions to the observed employee during the observations.

As the interviews took place in Flanders, they were all conducted in Dutch. All transcripts of interviews have been translated into English and can be found in Appendix 2. The original language versions will be provided upon request.

3.3. Participant observation

Participant observation entails the extended involvement of the researcher in the social life of those that are studied (Bryman, 2012, p. 431).

A characteristic of observation is that it enables the researcher to identify both the conscious and the taken-for-granted actions that informants rarely articulate despite participating in them (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 259).

A strength of observations is that it can be less disruptive than other qualitative methods. Consequently, the researcher will be less likely to influence the data he or she is collecting. Furthermore, it gives the researcher direct access to

social processes the moment they happen. (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 261)

The researcher has to keep in mind that he only has access to what happens right in front of him. Consequently, the researcher might miss important events happening simultaneously elsewhere in the organisation. Furthermore, there is a threat to the validity of the research since the respondents can act differently because they realise they are being observed (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 275).

In this context, Sarsby (1984) states that in field research, there are factors that will affect the outcome of the research but cannot be controlled by the researcher (p. 96, as cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 43.).

Gold (1958) categorised roles in sociological field observations as follows. Firstly, *the complete participant* does not reveal his true identity and role to those whom he observes. The complete participant is the only one who knows that he is, in reality another person than he pretends to be. Due to the covert nature of this role, ethical issues arise. Additionally, the observer can only take a limited amount of field notes and there is no possibility to use other research methods (Bryman, 2012 p. 436; Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 263).

Secondly, *the participant-as-observer* differs from the complete participant in the fact that he reveals the goal of his presence in the organisation. As a consequence, the problems of role pretending are minimised (Gold, 1958, p. 220). This research role requires the researcher to take part in the work of the informant. People in the setting acknowledge the presence as a participant who also observes because the observer has gained permission for the study (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 264).

Thirdly, the *observer-as-participant* participates only by being there. In contrast with previous roles, the observer is there primarily to observe rather than take part. Before entering the setting, the observer is likely to know which information he needs and the amount of time required in order to collect it. This leads to an increased certainty over the data that the observer wants to collect and the disruption to the informants. Consequently, this role is often more acceptable to informants. Moreover, the researcher has an opportunity to ask questions during the observations and the risk of over-identifying with the informants is smaller than in the first two roles. The limitations of this role are that the observer is prevented from being a real part of the setting. Therefore, the insights are less likely to be as rich as they would be if the observer were fully immersed in the field (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 266; Gold, 1958, p. 221).

Finally, *the complete observer* role removes the field worker from social interaction with informants. The observer does not take part in the setting but uses a hidden approach, creating no impact on the situation at all. The complete observer does not have any meaningful contact with the informants. Thus, the informants have no opportunity to give the researcher feedback or to influence the interpretation of their actions (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p. 268; Gold, 1968, 1958, p. 222).

Because of the limited period of time this research project was undertaken, the researcher took on the role of observer-as-participant. During the project, the researcher got access to the social media departments for one day in each company. The researcher did not want to participate in the daily routines of the organisation and was open and clear about the purposes of the research in the

communication about the project. During the observation, the observer took a total of 23 pages of written field notes and although the field notes are not appended, they will be provided upon request.

3.4. Limitations

Daymon and Holloway (2011) state that in qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument and consequently the research project can never be completely consistent and replicable. The outcome of the study depends on the characteristics and the background of the researcher. As a consequence, other researchers will have difference emphases even if they adopt the same methods and select a similar sample and topic area (p. 90). According to Daymon and Holloway (2011, p. 275), another threat to the validity of the research occurs during data collection. If informants are aware of the presence of the researcher, they may behave atypically. This atypical behaviour is called *the observer effect* and it can decrease when a researcher spends more time in the research setting. Since the observation study of this project took place over one day for each company, the reader must note that *the observer effect* was present during all of the observations.

Additionally, it must be noted that the companies in this thesis were contacted and took part in the research voluntarily. The researcher had the possibility to conduct an interview with social media managers at two out of three companies. Although there was no possibility to conduct an interview at Mobile Vikings, the researcher posed the necessary questions during the observations and got all the answers required for the analysis.

4. Analysis

4.1. Analysis of complaints and responses

4.1.1. *The disconfirmation paradigm confirmed*

As described in chapter 2, Resnik and Harmon (1983) state that a consumer complaint is a clear manifestation of dissatisfaction. Research suggests that a complaint is a reaction to negative confirmation of purchase expectations. Folkes (1984) mentions that there is an increased likelihood consumers will complain when the cause of the problem is external (i.e. due to a mistake the company has made or an error in the product). Consumers are less likely to complain when the blame is internal (i.e. due to the consumer's use of the product).

In order to get an overview of why people complain, the researcher browsed through the public Facebook and Twitter pages of the three participating organisations, using the concepts described by Folkes (1984) as a framework. On the social media pages of ING, it quickly became clear that customers mostly complained about technical issues, such as problems with the home banking system (Figure 4).

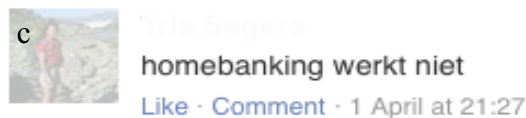


Figure 4: Typical complaint on the Facebook profile of ING België

When these questions arose, the web care employee checked whether the blame was internal or external by proposing several possible solution steps. After the consumer replied that he had followed these steps, the external blame was confirmed and there was a service failure. Additionally, there were service issues when the consumer mentioned they were dissatisfied with the way they were treated over the phone or by an employee at the local branch.

While visiting the social media pages of Brussels Airlines, the researcher noticed that the complaints were, among others, technical issues such as problems with the booking engine. As one would expect when scanning an airline's social media pages, there were also complaints about cancelled or delayed flights (Figure 5), travellers being treated inappropriately during a flight and customers having some issues with luggage delivery.

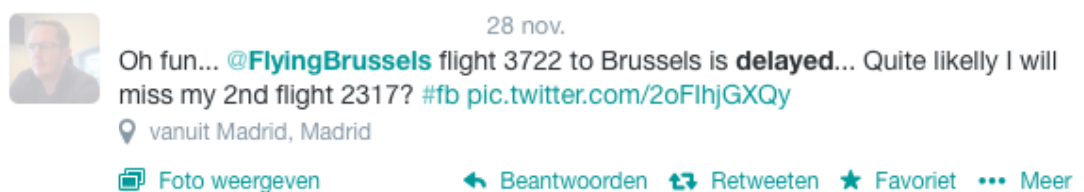


Figure 5: Typical consumer complaint about Brussels Airlines on Twitter

One remarkable and recurrent type of complaint was about the regular customer service. When the travellers had issues with the service centre on the phone or at the service desks, they complained on social media. During the interview, the social media manager confirmed this phenomenon. When such complaints arise, they need to check if the events really occurred and that is not always easy because mostly the customers do not mention the name of the helpdesk employee (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/04/2014). In this context, Kim Daenen mentioned the following: “*the customer is always right* but sometimes the customer abuses the power of social media in order to

get what he wants”. Therefore, companies should be aware that customers can use social media in order to restart the service recovery process.

At Mobile Vikings, the complaints were mainly about technical issues such as problems with the 4G-connection and network coverage. There were no real complaints concerning the service at other touch points.



Figure 6: Consumer complaint about 4G-network on the Facebook profile of Mobile Vikings

While browsing through the complaints on social media pages, it quickly became clear that the disconfirmation paradigm could be applied. The complaints the customers filed on all of the social network sites are a clear expression of dissatisfaction and it demonstrates that customers mostly not complain when the blame is internal. However, they do blame the company for the problems caused and try to find a solution by raising their voices in public.

4.1.2. Organisational responses

In the time the researcher browsed through the responses of ING and Brussels Airlines before the observations, it became clear that the helpdesk employees end the responses with their first name. This was also noticed during the observations at ING, and the observed employee mentioned that they do not use nicknames or initials in order to respond as personally as possible. By only

signing the posts with the employees' first names, the company protects the privacy of their team members. By doing this, the risk of being approached on their personal accounts is limited (ING, observations, 17/03/2014). The employee at Brussels Airlines confirmed the risk of personally being targeted, as there were events in the past when customers approached the social media managers on their private accounts. She mentioned that people are sitting behind their computers complaining, without realising there is a human being on the other side (Kim Daenen, observations, 11/03/2014). Consequently, some of the complaints turn out to be very harsh and personal. At Mobile Vikings, social media managers only sign the posts with their initials. Even though the companies try to be personal by applying this approach, the question arises whether they do not have to put more effort in introducing their employees. What do first names mean when customers cannot link them to an individual? Brussels Airlines tries to work around this problem by adding the social media manager's personal Twitter handle in the general information section at the social network site. This gives customers the opportunity to get some more information about whom they are communicating with.

Barlow and Møller (1996) mentioned that companies should see complaints as gifts and therefore, they should thank the consumer after they filed a complaint, because this can be of great value. During the analysis, the researcher noticed that ING and Brussels Airlines did thank their consumers for filing a complaint and notifying them. Mobile Vikings did not do this because most of the complaints they got were technical issues and they went over to solving them as soon as they received them (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014).

4.2. Routines and strategies

4.2.1. Practical aspects of complaint handling

According to Davidow (2003), the importance of the possibility to file complaints easily is called *facilitation*. As complaints are filed on social media, the organisations need to make sure these pages are managed well. The author also mentions the organisations need to inform customers about their willingness to handle complaints. While the researcher browsed through the social media activity, it was clear that all of the companies are actively engaged with complaint management. They have a social media team responding to the messages and on their respective social media pages; the organisations state that they are there to respond to their questions. One of the strengths of the Twitter page of ING and Brussels Airlines is that they mention between which hours the team is present. This is currently not done on the profile of Mobile Vikings.

When it comes to informing the customer about the willingness to handle complaints, ING announced the presence of the web care team on Twitter with a press release.

McCole (2004) mentions that companies need to make sure there are sufficient resources in order to capture and monitor the valuable complaint data. During the observations at the three companies, the researcher found out that companies use software tools in order to manage social media pages. This also allows the companies to log and categorise incoming complaints.

4.2.2. Communication strategy

According to the disconfirmation paradigm, a complaint finds its origin when expectations cannot be met (Donoghue and de Klerk, 2009, p. 457). During the research project, it became clear that companies make a distinction between a real complaint and a manifestation of dissatisfaction. When there is a compensation required, companies categorise complaints as official complaints. This was the case with ING where the web care employees decide whether or not it is a real complaint. If it is a real complaint, the company directs the customer to the mediations department where they can file an official complaint and fill out the official form. The company also mentions that not all complaints are real complaints. Rather than real complaints, they are expressions of dissatisfaction, and the web care department can solve this (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014). While browsing through the social media activity before the field research, the researcher found out that, in case the customers have a real complaint, (I. e. customers want the problem to be compensated), Brussels Airlines also asks them to fill out an official form.

Davidow's (2003) first dimension, timeliness, which is the perceived speed in which an organisation responds to a complaint, can be a critical factor after an unreasonable delay. According to Davidow, customers are aware of what could be a reasonable waiting time. ING realises that the expectations about the response time are higher when complaints are filed through social media. In order to avoid complaints about the response time, ING's service level agreements state that 90 per cent of the messages need to be answered within three hours. These agreements are the same for Facebook and Twitter but it is

easier to reach the 90 per cent on Twitter than on Facebook. This is due to the limitation on characters used in replies on Twitter. The company, however, is thinking about increasing the response speed by bringing the service level agreements to two hours (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/10/2014). The social media managers at Brussels Airlines aim to reply to incoming messages as soon as possible. Since they do not really operate as a customer service centre, they do not have real service levels. However, as the company is planning to integrate the social media web care into their customer service centre, service level agreements will be developed. The company will need to adjust the existing service level agreements because employees will be approached with different questions on social media than over the phone (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014).

During the observations at Mobile Vikings, the observer noticed that they try to gather as much information as possible before they reply with a solution. The observer noticed that the employee called one of the network administrators in order to collect information. Additionally, the employee wanted to reply to the messages on social media as soon as possible. The observed employee also said that sometimes, they cannot immediately solve the problem but when this happens, they tell the customers they are dealing with the problem. Additionally, she explained that after mentioning this, the customer's negative tone of voice became positive (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014).

These findings demonstrate that companies are well aware of this dimension. It is, however, not always easy to reply to a complaint as fast as possible as the social media managers need time to investigate the issue.

4.3. Organisational image

4.3.1. Protection of the image

Clark et al. (1992) state that the management of complaints can be considered as an important image-building tool. Furthermore, customers are likely to tell others about their dissatisfaction with an organisation (p. 42). When they do this online, it is much more harmful for the image than when they do this in the offline world.

The customer service department of ING is aware of this phenomenon, and therefore they have a close contact with the reputation and communication department (CCandR – department). This department takes care of complaints that are potentially harmful for the image. When the web care department receives possible image-threatening complaints, they immediately pass it on to the CCandR – department (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014). Brussels Airlines is also aware of this impact, but they mention that social media is so unpredictable that the only thing they can do is manage the reputation as well as possible. They also mentioned that if a social media crisis would occur, they would try to handle it as good as possible by trying to react positively. This can only be done when the brand is sincere. Additionally, the interviewee mentioned that conversations on social media might harm the image at that particular moment but, unless real crises appear, it should not have too much effect on the image (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014).

Prim and Pras (1999, p. 335) state that one of the reasons why organisations need to be aware of the impact of complaint handling is that when consumers are satisfied by the organisational responses, they might become more loyal

than others. This was confirmed during the observations at Brussels Airlines, where the employee mentioned that they want to provide everyone with an answer because afterwards they often get positive feedback. Social media offer a great advantage for the organisational image because when consumers are happy about the service delivered, they might even become brand ambassadors and spread positive comments (Brussels Airlines, observations, 11/03/2014). Furthermore, the respondent mentioned that feedback, either positively or negatively, is always good, because when customers post a negative comment on social media, it means they are interested in giving the organisation a second chance (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014). This confirmed the statement made by Prim and Pras (1999), as the authors claimed that by complaining, the customer gives the company a second chance and the possibility to defend itself.

This is of importance for the organisational image because by explaining why problems occurred, the company has a chance to improve its services and avoid negative comments in the future. Additionally, by doing this on a public forum, organisations show that they are open to consumer's opinions and willing to put effort in helping them.

4.3.2. Attentiveness

Hart (2011) states that, by joining a social network page, a consumer wants the organisation to act in a conversational and humanistic way. Additionally, Davidow (2003, p. 244) states that it is important that a customer gets a personalised response. In this context, the interviewee at ING mentioned that the communication on Facebook and Twitter is less formal compared to the

other written communication, so employees can use emoticons and they can answer with an occasional joke.

Additionally, he mentioned: “I think we have to step in the world of the customer to ensure he understood it and we do not want to overwhelm them with technical language” (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014). Brussels Airlines also applies this strategy, as they mentioned that it is really important to approach the customer in the same way he approaches you. When someone with an extensive knowledge of aviation posts a comment, the company will respond in a similar style. Sometimes the social media managers even call specific departments to ask how to explain some cases and which terms to use. On the other hand, people that clearly do not know much about the aviation or travel industry will be approached in a simplified language (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014). The researcher noticed that at Mobile Vikings, they reply in a specific style to the messages but they also mentioned the requirement to adapt their reactions according to the customers (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014).

Furthermore, Hart (2011) mentioned that a company should not simply cut and paste sample responses when they reply to consumer complaints. During the observations, however, the researcher noticed that Mobile Vikings and Brussels Airlines designed template emails in order to reply their customers. The social media team sometimes uses parts of these templates in replies on social media. The company designed this to reply to messages that often occur and the employee explained that even though they use a template, they still try to personalise the message (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014; Brussels Airlines, observations, 11/03/2014).

4.3.3. How to treat social media influentials

While reviewing the existing literature, it became clear that little research has been done on how companies can deal with influential social media users (influentials). However, it is obvious that complaints filed on social media by influential users can have even more impact on the image than when other customers complain. For example, this is what happened when film director Kevin Smith, who currently has more than 2,5 million followers on Twitter, was kicked off a SouthWest Air flight because he did not fit in one seat. Smith started complaining on Twitter, which got the company into a communication crisis (People, 2010). When asking whether the companies treat customers with a lot of influence differently than customers with fewer followers, ING answered that a complaint, regardless of where it comes from, will always be solved in the same way. The amount of followers does not really matter, as the outcome of the process will always be the same. However, they mentioned that the speed that companies solve a complaint can play a role as the company is sensitive to the impact of influential people. The company will not pay more attention and provide a better service to influential customers, but the cases will be monitored more closely. Furthermore, it must be noted that the company has clear rules for journalists. The organisation needs to investigate whether the journalists acts out of personal interest or out of his professional function. When the latter is the case, the company forwards it to the CCandR department. Additionally, he mentioned that, no matter whom they are talking to, the final goal is to satisfy the customer and the company wants to show they are open to the customer's feedback and willing to help them to solve their problems (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/04/2014). The

observer noticed that they follow the same response strategy at Mobile Vikings, because they do not change their strategy according to the complainant's amount of followers. The employee mentioned that this would be disadvantageous because of the public aspect. If people notice influential getting a preferential treatment, it would be more harmful than beneficial to the organisational image. Nonetheless, the employee mentioned that, when they have a complaint coming from someone with more followers on Twitter, they would also pay even more attention to the case (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014). At Brussels Airlines, they mentioned that they do notice the amount of followers, but the company should not prioritise accordingly. The consumer can have few followers or influence on social networks, but he can be a frequent flyer. Therefore, they do not try to differentiate their approach. However, when someone with a lot of followers approaches the company, they look at the shareability of their replies. They will think about their replies because if they reply with something funny, it might get retweeted (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014).

4.3.4. Public or private

Hirshman (1970) mentioned that when dissatisfaction occurs, consumers have the choice to either leave the relationship or to try and restore the relationship by raising their voices. According to the taxonomy proposed by Singh in 1988, the action customers can undertake to file their complaints is either private or public. The model proposed that public action could consist of immediately approaching the organisation to get some compensation, undertake legal action or they complain to public and private agencies. On the other hand, private action consisted of the boycott of the organisation or informing acquaintances

about the negative experience. It is clear that with the emergence of social media, these models should be revised. When consumers are reaching out to companies over their public social network sites, there is no private action anymore. By doing so, there is an immediate link between the public action (i.e. talking to the company) and private action (i.e. informing friends and relatives). Therefore, it would be beneficial to add a semi-private category to the taxonomy because by posting a complaint on a social network site, they do not only inform the company but also everyone they are linked to. Consequently, complainants only need to post once and they will reach two completely different target groups. While browsing through the social media pages, it became clear that companies are aware of this taxonomy.

Furthermore, the researcher found out that all of the companies try to transform these public actions into private actions by asking the consumer to send a mobile phone number, booking reference or account information in a private message. In the interview, the researcher was told that ING only pulls people to a private mode when it concerns sensitive information and privacy needs to be protected. They mentioned that they do not want the people to get used to spreading their bank information in order to avoid phishing. Furthermore, they stated that pulling away the customer from a public forum is an extra convenience because that way, they ensure that nothing escalates and they avoid other people joining the conversation. However, it must be noted that the main reason for doing this are privacy concerns (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014). At Brussels Airlines, they follow the same strategy.

During the observations, the researcher asked about the reasoning behind it and they mentioned that it is important that customers do not post their booking reference on a public page because people with bad intentions could change the flight details based on the booking reference and the name (Brussels Airlines, observations, 11/03/2014). At Mobile Vikings, they ask customers to send them their phone number in a private message. The employee explained that the reason to do this is twofold. Firstly, they avoid people posting their personal phone number online and thus protect the customer's privacy. Secondly, they avoid issues becoming bigger on the public wall (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/04/2014). As all of the companies follow the same structure, it becomes clear that they are well aware of the threats posed by social media and they anticipate image-threatening messages by pulling the customer away as much as possible. Nevertheless, companies use the customer's privacy rather than the organisational image as an argument.

Because they are aware of the power of social media, ING added precautions to the process in order to be sure that nothing unacceptable appears on the public wall. During the observation process, the researcher noticed that their methodology was remarkably different than the process of the other companies. Firstly, ING applies the *four eyes – principle* for its Twitter posts. This means that before the employee posts the reply, a colleague reads and approves the message (ING, Observations, 17/04/2014). Secondly, concerning the posts on Facebook, the company implemented an extra validation, as the employees need to email their proposed answers for Facebook posts to the entire web care team. This email consists of screenshots and a response

proposal. After the team leader approves these responses, they can post them on Facebook (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/04/2014).

The interview clarified that these processes are different because it took the employees less time to get used to the complaint handling process on Twitter than on Facebook. Additionally, the respondent mentioned that one can do less harm in 140 characters than when there are more characters available. They see these extra validations purely as a part of their coaching (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014).

Even though the companies realise that being as transparent as possible is of great importance for the credibility and the reputation of the organisation, they sometimes need to remove posts from their public wall. At Mobile Vikings, the observed employee mentioned that they do not remove anything from their wall. Sometimes consumers even post parts of a private conversation on the public wall, but they do not remove it in order to remain as transparent as possible (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014). Brussels Airlines also follows this strategy, but during the observations the employee explained that they do not remove anything unless the message consists of private information about one of the employees (Brussels Airlines, observations, 11/03/2014). It was slightly different at ING, where the researcher observed that the helpdesk employee proposed to remove certain posts from the public wall. When asking more information about these actions, the employee mentioned they remove comments when reactions were too personal or too harsh (ING, observations, 17/03/2014). Later on, the team leader provided the researcher with more information: “We only remove posts when they, among others, comprise harsh language without further comments or questions, when employees are

personally targeted or when there is a case of phishing (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 20/05/14)”.

In sum, it is clear that the companies want to remain as transparent as possible, but they consider removing image-threatening messages from their public wall. Furthermore, by managing the incoming complaints, they try and protect the personal image of the employees. The company is aware that unsatisfied customers can attack the employees personally, and therefore they were allowed to hide those comments.

4.4. Implementation at a strategic level

4.4.1. Facilitation

Zairi (2000, p. 333) mentioned the importance of having different methods to be approached, even 24/7 if possible. It seems the companies realise this importance and they put a lot of effort in trying to be as accessible as possible. Even though ING has chosen to start the implementation of complaint handling on social media not too actively, they acknowledge the importance of social media in their strategy. However, they want to gradually build up their social media activities by increasing the communication about the possibilities of web care on social media and they also want to expand their opening hours (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014). At Brussels Airlines, they realise they need to expand their opening hours, and they want to apply this in the future by integrating the social media helpdesk in their customer service centre (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014). At Mobile Vikings, they have an extension until 22:00 on weekdays and they are also accessible during the weekend. During the observation, the researcher noticed

that at lunchtime, the employee messaged another employee that she wanted to go and have lunch. The employee explained that they want to guarantee a constant cover so during breaks someone else took it over (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014).

The researcher also wanted to find out whether companies would always treat complaints on the same platform as they were approached in the first place. At Mobile Vikings, the researcher observed that when a problem occurs that they cannot explain on social media, they switch over to email (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014). The social media manager at Brussels Airlines confirmed this. She mentioned that they will always use the medium that is the most suitable. As they have, certainly in aviation, some rules that are difficult to explain in only 140 characters on Twitter, they would explain it via email. In order to do this, they designed a special email address where people can reach the social media team (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014). At ING, the purpose is to reply and finish the conversation on the same medium as the complaint arrived. The observer noticed that the employee always ends the conversations. The company applies this because they want to ensure the follow-up is done fluently and in the end, they want the customer to feel satisfied. The employee has the freedom to decide what happens between the start and the end of the process, so they can pick the most efficient medium. As all of the employees have call centre experience, it is sometimes better to handle things over the phone. Whichever medium they chose, they always have to go back to the conversation on the social network and finish it by saying they made an agreement on the phone. The interviewee also mentioned that they want to use their wide variety of resources in order to provide the

customer with the best possible service (ING, personal communication and observations, 17/03/2014).

4.4.2. Encouraging the consumer to complain

Prim and Pras (1999, p. 335) mention that companies should encourage consumers to complain in order to collect useful information about the firm's dysfunctional behaviours or service failures. This information can only help the company to improve the quality of the services.

During the analysis of the social media activity, the researcher found out that ING asks the customer questions in order to know what is going on. The company plans on having a broader communication about the presence of web care on social media. Afterwards, they want to encourage the customers more to share their feedback, either negatively or positively. However, when it comes to customer complaint management, they prefer the traditional media and the official customer complaint form (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014). When asked whether Brussels Airlines would encourage the customers to complain in order to improve the company's quality and services, they responded that they realise they need to enhance this encouragement. At the moment the company does not encourage travellers to file complaints enough because their complaint-handling team is limited to two employees. They are aware that, if companies encourage people to file their complaints on social media, they should be able to meet their needs. However, the company plans on integrating the social media service in the customer service centre. Thereafter, the purpose is to promote the availability of the helpdesk on social media more actively. For example, they can use their in-flight communication channels to tell customers that their social media team is

available to respond to their questions or remarks (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014).

4.4.3. Empowerment

Nowadays organisations acknowledge the benefits of relationship marketing and they realise that building relationships with the customer is a key concern (Cook and Macaulay, 1997, p. 39). Therefore, Cook and Macaulay (1997) stated companies should see complaints as a means to avoid problems and develop plans for the future. In their proposed empowerment framework, they encourage companies to take a positive and proactive approach to complaining consumers. Additionally, they mentioned that companies need to develop skills in complaint handling.

In this context, the employee at ING mentioned that they can solve the problems because they had the same training as the employees who are working in the field (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014). Additionally, the observed employee at ING mentioned they attended a media workshop by Steven Van Belleghem, who is a Belgian influential in the field of social media and conversation management (ING, observations, 17/03/2014). Nevertheless, during the interview the researcher found out that the web care team does not always solve the issues as they sometimes forward the customers to the customer service department or their local branches. They believe the local branches can solve a lot of problems because of the personal connection with the customers (Frederik Simoen, personal communication, 17/03/2014).

During the observations at Mobile Vikings, the employee explained there are moments when they cannot decide how to solve the problem themselves. When problems like that occur, the employee asks the customer to explain the

problem in an email that can get passed on to the team leader. However, when they know they can solve the problem themselves, they have the permission to do so (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014). During the observations, the researcher noticed that the social media managers at Brussels Airlines have access to the booking engine. This allows them to be on track with all the events happening and they can immediately check in the programme when a problem arises (Brussels Airlines, observations, 11/03/2014). Additionally, social media managers can decide independently which answers they provide. Furthermore, they can decide whether or not they compensate the complainant. Nevertheless, there are cases when they have to communicate with other departments. For example, when a customer's complaint got rejected at the customer relations department and he tries again over social media, the social media managers cannot make a decision because customer relations has the final say when it comes to refunding flights. However, if they feel they should re-examine the case, they discuss the problem with customer relations (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014).

During the interviews and observations, the researcher found out that companies only started realising the importance of handling complaints on social media recently. At Brussels Airlines, they managed to convince the management of the importance of social media management by using the feedback provided by the customers. The employee mentioned that at the beginning, 70 per cent of the messages they received were negative but at the moment, they only receive 40 per cent of negative messages (Brussels Airlines, observations, 11/03/2014). This shows that the more effort the company puts

into professionally dealing with social media, the more positive the feedback they receive from their customers.

4.4.4. Apologies and redress

Bolkan and Daly (2007) mention that organisational excuses can reduce consumer complaints. In this context, Bear and Hill (1994) categorised organisational excuses as linkage excuses and valence excuses. While analysing the excuses of Brussels Airlines, it becomes clear that their style can be categorised as linkage excuses, and more specifically, the company uses the strategy of explanation excuses. By doing this, they present details that might decrease accountability and as a consequence of applying this strategy, they hope to lower the sense of criticism. Davidow (2003) mentioned that managers would only allow their team to give an apology if they believed the complaint was legitimate, whereas consumers expect an apology because it shows courtesy and respect. This difference can be found in the approach of Brussels Airlines and ING on the one side and Mobile Vikings on the other. While analysing the social media activity, it quickly became clear that the first two companies noticeably respond with excuses, while the third company rarely includes excuses in its responses. During the observations, the employee at Mobile Vikings explained that they do not often react with excuses because they give the impression that the company is making a mistake. Therefore, they only respond with excuses when something is really an organisational error (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014). The actions of Mobile Vikings are in contrast with what Davidow (2003) states, as the author mentioned that apologising can show understanding of the dissatisfaction perceived by the customer without having to take the blame (p. 241). This is how the social

media managers at Brussels Airlines perceive apologies: “Not everyone is looking for compensation. Some are just looking for sincere apologies. We often see that that’s the case” (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014). This proves the point made by Davidow (2003), as the author claims that expectations of redress are not always monetary and therefore companies should check with the customer what they expect (p. 239). Xia (2013) also mentions that expressing sincerity and respect is effective in building brand-consumer relationships. Furthermore, the interviewee mentioned that sometimes it is sufficient to thank the customer for notifying them as it can only help the company improving their services. They always mention they will pass it on to the department involved because the customer’s feedback is valuable (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014).

Another dimension of service recovery actions according to Davidow (2003) is redress. The author mentions that consumers must at least be returned to the point they were before the dissatisfaction occurred. As this study examined service companies, this was not always possible. When it comes to technological complaints such as a mobile phone connection or a home banking system that is not working, consumers can be returned to the point they were simply by fixing those problems. However companies will never be able to compensate the time the customers lost, or the calls they missed. This is certainly the case with Brussels Airlines, as the company will not be able to compensate the time consumers lost when a plane was delayed. Therefore, they should look for other options in order to restore the service. Although partial redress will never lead to full satisfaction, the company needs to be aware that that is the only way to go. The social media manager explained that

complaining on social media is no guarantee to receive compensation. However, if people have a complaint where compensation would be appropriate, the company will compensate, exactly as they would do if the consumer filed his complaint through customer relations or the call centre. When they receive complaints or requests for compensations, the social media managers always need to investigate whether or not the complaint is legitimate, as some consumers continue their complaints on social media until they receive compensation. However, the company will try to appease the consumer with money but they can try and offer the traveller, for example, air miles. Additionally, she mentioned that it is not because they complain in public that they will get rewarded, because this would encourage others to do it more often (Kim Daenen, personal communication, 11/03/2014). This was also mentioned during the observations at Mobile Vikings. The employee mentioned that, based on the weight of the problem they can decide whether the customer can get compensated or not. She also mentioned that they have to be careful with compensations since people would take advantage of it (Mobile Vikings, observations, 06/03/2014).

5. Concluding Discussion

To conclude, this thesis searched to find an answer to the question of how service-providing companies deal with customer complaints on social media. This study was conducted by interviewing and observing three social media departments of Belgian service-providing companies, namely ING, Mobile Vikings and Brussels Airlines. As a preparation for these interviews and observations, the researcher thoroughly scanned the companies' social media pages for complaints and the organisational responses.

The first research question guiding this project was aimed at discovering the routines service-providing companies apply in order to achieve an effective consumer complaint management outcome on social media. In this context, it became clear that companies prefer using social media management software rather than the web browser. This makes it easier for companies to organise their replies.

The researcher found out that the companies could inform the customer about the social media presence more actively. Even though they are actively engaged, Brussels Airlines and ING do not do this sufficiently. They could have a better communication about the willingness to handle complaints and respond to questions on social media. The employees are aware there is a need for a better communication and they mentioned they will increase it in the future. Davidow (2003) stressed this importance by mentioning that it is important to inform the customer about the willingness of the company to

handle complaints. In this context, ING Belgium stated that they do not aim to use social media as a standard complaint medium. They mentioned that other media are more suitable for complaint management.

Additionally, the researcher noticed that the observed and interviewed employees were committed to transparency. However, due to privacy or safety regulations it is not always easy to reach complete openness. Sometimes organisations have internal agreements stating that some things cannot be shared on social media, and consequently this has an impact on the companies' transparency.

Furthermore, this project aimed to find out how companies assess and judge the potential impact of consumer complaints on the organisational image. The researcher found out that ING has a close contact with the reputation department that advises them about possible threats. Additionally, the social media managers forward image-threatening messages to that department. The interviews clarified that although companies are aware of the potential danger, it is impossible to be completely prepared for an image-threatening complaint on social media because of the medium's unpredictability. Even though companies cannot predict what will be posted, there is a need to develop at least some guidelines for when this happens.

Although companies do not treat influential on social media differently, they do acknowledge they look at the amount of followers on Twitter before they reply. Users with more followers do not necessarily need to receive a better treatment, because it could be that users with fewer followers are better customers. Companies realise that giving influential complainers a different

treatment could harm the organisation more than it could be beneficial. Nevertheless, ING mentioned they are very careful when it comes to journalists.

The aim of the third research question was to find out how service providers demonstrate the implementation of complaint management on social media at a strategic level. In this context, the researcher found out that social media gets more and more recognised on a strategic level. Nonetheless, the researcher noted a discrepancy between what the social media managers want to do and what the management applies in the overall strategy. Even though companies claim high service levels, they do not have large budgets for service management on social media. There is a clear discrepancy between the high standards they seem to have and the practical implementation. Therefore, it is clear that the management still needs to acknowledge that there is a need for more employees to manage incoming posts and complaints on social media. During the research process, it became clear that management does not recognise the importance of having sufficient employees on stand-by. Companies still treat social media as they treat any other medium, but in contrast to traditional media, the public aspect of social media can be threatening to the company's image. In the end, companies and customers have the same interests, as the consumers want to be satisfied and companies want to have satisfied consumer. This research cannot completely exclude the uncertainty that the management puts everything into satisfying the customer's wishes. As complaints can reach the company in the middle of the night or during the weekend, it is clear that enough staff is of great importance. In this context, it is remarkable that two out of three companies

were not accessible during the weekend and handled the complaints they received on Monday morning. Companies acknowledge these problems and even though they are working on an expansion of the opening hours, they do not plan on being available 24/7.

The final research question intended to find out how companies manage the public aspect of social media. In this context, the paper found that there is an obvious need to revise the already existing consumer complaint taxonomies. The consumer complaint behaviour shifted from private media such as phone calls and complaint letters to a public forum. By complaining on a public forum, the consumers do not only inform the company about their dissatisfaction but they also inform their entire network. Therefore, the organisations need to be aware of this and they need to respond carefully. This extra dimension clarifies that a semi-private/voice response category should be added to Singh's taxonomy of 1988, which will be presented next.

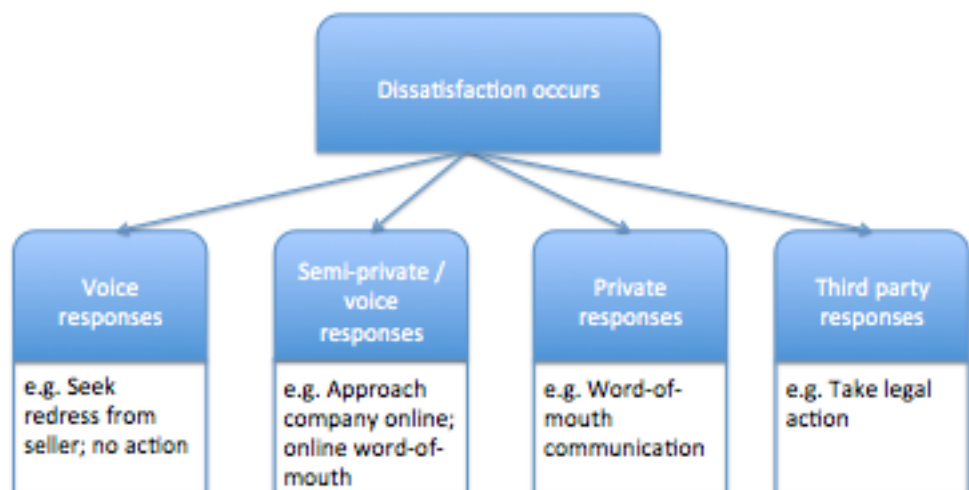


Figure 7: Revision of Singh's (1988) taxonomy of consumer complaint behaviour (2014)

By filing their complaints on social media, they reach two groups that one previously considered as separate. It is obvious that companies know that social networks are there and they use it as a communication channel. Nevertheless, when a real complaint is posted on social network sites, social media managers direct consumers to a different medium such as a private message or an online complaint form. Consequently, consumers get the impression of getting a personal approach by having their issue dealt with on social media. However, they are just channelled into the regular complaint management system and their complaints are handled the same way as regular complaints. One way of working around this, and improving the efficiency of the complaint management system would be to give social media managers the same responsibilities and training as the regular complaint managers. Furthermore, the researcher noticed that social media clearly differ from regular media in the way that companies acknowledge the customer simply by saying they are looking into the problem immediately after they received a complaint.

Additionally, it must be noted that there is a shift in expectations. Consumers know there is a possibility of reaching organisations on social network sites. The fast pace of social media has raised consumer's expectations, as they want a reply as soon as possible. Consumers got used to getting fast responses and they expect organisations to react quickly. The title of this thesis states that "the customer is always right", but in some cases the customer only thinks they are right. When customers are not treated satisfactorily through one of the other channels, they can complain about that customer service on social network sites. As companies want to keep the service level high, they try to satisfy and help their consumers as fast as possible.

Consumers realise more and more what they can achieve by approaching organisations on their social media pages. Companies try to anticipate these reactions by not rewarding the consumers systematically. This new public dimension of consumer complaint behaviour gives the customer more power than ever before, which is, of course, a new potential threat for the organisation that management boards do not really seem to be aware of.

This project explored the seldom-researched overlap between different areas of research. As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis stressed the blurring lines between strategic public relations, customer complaint management and internal communications. It is clear that these disciplines, which have been considered as different areas for too long, need to find a way to connect. These areas of practice seem to flow together and until today, the area of customer complaint management has not been considered as a topic to be handled by the communication department, or even strategic communication scholars. A lot of research has been done on the winning points of social media and customer complaint management but research also needs to consider the negative aspects. The use of social network sites can benefit or harm the organisations and the only way of dealing with it is by designing a strategy involving a clear integration and collaboration of the different disciplines.

Appendix

1. Auditing customer complaints management systems

Table AI Auditing customer complaints management systems

Best practice application from MBNQA winners	Degree of importance					Degree of effectiveness									
	Not important at all	Relatively important	Very important			Not effective at all	Relatively effective	Extremely effective							
1. Several methods are used to ensure ease of customer contact, 24 hours a day if necessary (for example, toll-free numbers, pagers for contact personnel, surveys, interviews, focus groups, electronic bulletin boards)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
2. Requirements for building relationships are identified and may include factors such as product knowledge, employee responsiveness, and various customer contact methods	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
3. Customer-contact employees are empowered to make decisions to address customer concerns	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
4. Adequate staff are available to maintain effective customer contact	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
5. Performance expectations are set for employees whose job brings them in regular contact with customers	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
6. The performance of employees against these expectations is measured and tracked	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
7. A system exists to ensure that customer complaints are resolved promptly and effectively	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
8. Complaints and customer concerns are resolved at first contact. This often means training customer-contact employees and giving them authority for resolving a broad range of problems	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
9. Complaint data are tracked and used to initiate prompt corrective action to prevent the problem from recurring	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
10. Problem resolution priority setting is based on the potential cost impact of customer decisions to repurchase or recommend the product or service to others	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
11. Procedures are in place and evaluated to ensure that customer contact is initiated to follow up on recent transactions to build relationships	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
12. Feedback is sought on the effectiveness of service	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
13. A systematic approach exists to evaluate and improve service and customer relationships	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
14. Feedback from customers and employees is systematically used in the improvement process	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
15. Training and development plans and replacement procedures exist for customer-contact employees	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
16. Objective customer service standards have been derived from customer expectations (for example, timeliness, courtesy, efficiency, thoroughness and completeness)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
											Overall actual score		<input type="checkbox"/>		
											Max: 160		<input type="checkbox"/>		

2. Interviews

2.1. *Frederik Simoen, Team leader Webcare team at ING. Translated version.*

Q: How long has ING been on Twitter and Facebook?

A: Webcare will have been active for 2 years on the 26th of June.

Q: Do you communicate the presence of the webcare-team to the customer or is this not actively promoted?

A: We have chosen to start calmly. I think there has been a press release when we launched our Twitter account. Facebook had been in use for a longer time, but rather for marketing purposes. Back then, we did not react on complaints on Facebook and we started very softly. So only the press release. I don't think you can find a lot of references to the social media on our website, but this is something we want to build up gradually. It's a new way of working so we wanted to master it first but the intention is to communicate more and more about it. We also want to expand our opening hours. We would like to start with being more proactive and we want to give it more visibility in the coming months.

Q: Do you have meetings, weekly or monthly, in order to keep everyone on track of what is happening in the company?

A: In any case, concerning the knowledge of products and services, our employees went through all the necessarily training. They are all people who have, besides webcare, also another function in the company. Actually they are

in the front line, either on call or in the email team, so everyone has the finger on the pulse and their team has meetings about products and services that change. That is one thing, so on the knowledge level it is okay. Then, of course, there are cases that are more sensitive to the reputation of the company, and therefore we have direct contact with the CCandR department, so the reputation and communication department, where there is a big exchange of thoughts such as ‘look, this is about to happen, and keep an eye on this or ...’

Q: Does that also work the other way round? Do they monitor what happens on social media?

A: There are two main tasks. Firstly, they have to respond to a post whereof I think it is clear that webcare takes care of it, but another task that should not be underestimated is the daily monitoring of what is being said or written on social media. If they find cases that are sensitive or can lead to an issue, they pass it on to the CC and R department.

Q: Would you encourage customers to complain in order to improve the service and quality of your services?

A: This can be linked with the broader communication about the fact that we are present on social media. It will partly depend on that communication. What we always do is, with every customer we’ve been in touch with, we say “look, if there is still an issue, do not hesitate to come back”. Through social media. So we stay in contact, or we hope that the connection, once they found us through this channel, the contact can continue. Of course, if it’s really about a complaint, we have... well a complaint needs to be written and it needs to be

sent through our website. So if it's really a complaint we can't get around, we have to direct the customer to the *mediations* department. What we do as well: we have an agreement with 'mediations' and our customer service department. Sometimes we say: "look, this is a real complaint, and we pass it on to them and they will do the necessary to solve the problem", because a lot of complaints aren't real complaints. Rather than real complaints, they are expressions of dissatisfaction and this kind of complaints we can solve in the first line. When we notice that it doesn't work, we will pass it on internally or we ask the customer to fill out the official form.

Q: Yeah, you judge whether it is a heavy complaint or not...

A: Yeah, the customer tells us his story and it is clear that, okay, this has gone wrong, or this is a complaint, or we can't solve this anymore, or we stick to our standpoint, because that is, unfortunately, sometimes the case. So based on that...

Q: And how much time does it take to investigate a problem? Do you have a maximum length of time for something to be answered?

A: We have our service level agreements (SLAs) that 90 per cent of the messages need to be answered within three hours.

Q: Is there a difference between Facebook or Twitter? Or is it the same for both networks?

A: No, the target is the same but we see that we reach the 90 per cent on Twitter more easily than on Facebook. Those three hours are... there is a

possibility this will be reduced to two hours in the future, but I have to say that, when it comes to customer experience, it seldom happens that get comments about... “still no answer or whatever”. So in that sense, it is less present in the customer’s mind that they want an answer within two or three hours, but we strive to provide 90 per cent with an answer within 3 hours.

Q: Is 90 per cent not too ambitious?

A: Yeah, beware, when we see what our Dutch colleagues are doing.. I think they have one hour as service level agreement and they reach 90 or more than 90 per cent.

Q: Yeah, on social media you can’t wait too long before you answer...

A: Yeah, it’s faster, the customer wants... the expectations are higher.

Q: Is 140 characters on Twitter or the limited amount of words you can post on Facebook enough to provide them with an answer? Or would you rather call the customer or try to reach them in another way? Or do you prefer to keep it on the medium they contacted you in the first place?

A: The purpose is actually... something enters through social media and you reply through the medium in which it arrives. We will also finish the conversation on the medium the message at which it arrived. That is what is most important. What happens between the start and the end, I think the employee has to decide which medium is the most efficient. Because the goal is to make the customer happy again. And this can happen via mail, but a better is over the phone. All of our people have call enter experience. That’s why

both ways are chosen. We want to apply this because we want to use this variation of resources. That is an extra value because sometimes 140 characters are not enough or sometimes it's just better to handle things over the phone. So we will do it, but after this they should finish with : 'look, as agreed by telephone'...

Q: Don't you try to get your customers in a private message?

A: Yeah, we do.. We have... a bank often has sensitive information... but when it is about general issues, we communicate in public. But issues that sometimes... it depends on the customer, but sometimes it's much better to handle it further in private mode. Also because we want to avoid phishing. We don't want to give the people the habit to publish whatever they want on Facebook. That's absolutely not all right. So we will ask them quickly... can you send us some information through...

Q: That way you pull dissatisfied customers directly away from the public forum.

A: That's an extra convenience. You ensure that nothing escalates on a public platform. I think that, in the end, no one wins anything with that. It's only throwing mud and others join the conversation, so it's not recommendable. But it is an extra opportunity.

Q: Do you have a specific style to reply? Does that get changed according to the situation or does it differ from employee to employee?

A: There are some guidelines. In the sense that the communication on Facebook and Twitter, compared to our other written communication is much less formal. So we also speak with 'you' on the Flemish side but on the French side we still use the polite form 'vous'. Because it's still sensitive. We also work with smileys and the employees may joke occasionally. We also encourage employees to search for their own personal style because that's an extra value. As they are people answering, and not robots. So in that sense, it can be a lot more personal and a lot less formal than we communicate via letters or emails. It's a perfect medium to communicate like that.

Q: Will you treat someone with a lot of knowledge about the business differently?

A: Yeah, we do, I think... it's partly a mirror. We try to be flexible with our customers. How does the customer write about certain cases? How does he look at cases? I think we have to step into the world of the customer to, on the one hand, ensure he understood it and we don't want to overwhelm the customer with technical language. When he speaks about a *cash reserve* we are going to use that word in our communication and we won't say *cash facility* because he won't know what it's about. So in that sense, we step into the world and the vocabulary of the customers.

Q: Are you aware of the disadvantages of social media? Do you realise that complaints on social media can be very harmful for the company's reputation? And do you react on these harmful actions?

A: Yeah absolutely. Are we aware ? That's the first thing. We are aware of it, hence our close relationship with CCandR, so, absolutely. Beware, on the one hand it's good that... we are open to that feedback, that's a reason why we are on social media, but of course it's also a risk. It can go quickly.

Last week we had a case with ING Netherlands (Comment of the author: ING Netherlands wanted to sell customer data so companies could advertise targeted). There was a lot of buzz around this topic, so these are issues we have to follow up closely. I think the people's feedback was clear and we passed it on internally.

Q: Do you assess the potential impact of complaints? Will you treat someone with a lot of impact differently than someone with fewer followers?

A: For me, a complaint, regardless where it comes from, will normally always be solved in the same way. It doesn't matter if the complaint was posted on social media or through the website. Nor does it matter that the person filing the complaint has 100 000 followers or only 20. The solution, outcome will normally be the same. Of course the speed can play a role. We are sensitive to the impact of people. A journalist or whatever... we will pay more attention to those cases than to cases of someone that has only 20 followers. I guess that's normal. The impact on social media is much larger but the guidelines... the customer services are the same.

Q: Suppose there is someone with a lot of influence, like a journalist. And he starts to complain; will you then apply other strategies? E.g. Will you get someone else than the regular team members to react?

A: A journalist is actually always a difficult case because there are clear rules for journalists. That depends... is the journalist acting out of personal interest or is he really looking for something? If he really acts in his function then it always gets forwarded to CCandR, so our reputation and communications department. These are just internal rules. But otherwise, I think we handle everyone in the same way. We're just going to follow the case more closely and see how it turns out. I think the final goal is...: you just want a satisfied customer, and whether it's a journalist, a minister, or who ever... You just want to show them that you're open to their feedback, and you will always look for a solution for their problems. That's the idea.

Q: Do your customer service managers have a time margin for decisions or does everything need to be approved?

A: It depends on the nature of the case in question. A real complaint is designated for the 'customer service department' that will handle it through its own classical channels. Further, a complaint about a bankcard that has not been ordered, of course, we're going to solve it, we will order a new one and send it. So, of course they have the freedom to do a number of things.

Q: But they have to send that one email before they post the reactions?

A: Oh yeah, the validation. They are free to draft their own comments but they have to... yeah that's pure and only applying the 'four-eyes principle'. Yeah they have to..

Q: Is there a reason why the four-eyes principle is applied differently on Facebook than on Twitter?

A: Yes, because we have seen that... it's purely a part of our coaching, because we have seen that it took them less time to get used to it on Twitter. In 140 characters you can do less harm than when they have more characters... and we also noticed that the questions and complexity on Facebook are much higher than on Twitter. That's why we introduced an extra validation.

Q: Did you get complaints that you had to decide to give it out of hands? Or that you had to organise a meeting to decide how to handle them?

A: No we didn't. Every customer also has an office, so in that sense... we are not always the department that will solve a complaint. We will try to forward the customer to 'customer service' of his local branch. These local branches can still solve a lot of problems because they know the customer personally.

2.3. Kim Daenen, Social Media Manager at Brussels Airlines. Translated version.

Q: What routines and strategies do you use for customer complaint management on social media?

A: Our team exists of two persons for the complaint management and we have SparkCentral as a tool. We meet every Monday morning in order to discuss which problems have arisen, who we can call in which case,... We also have a list of people we can contact in case of... yeah, questions about operations, about maintenance, about all different aspects. Hmm.. we complete that list and we examine if we need to improve, and at the end of the month we edit a report that mentions how many questions we got, the amount of positive and negative, and that way we can implement it in the KPI's of customer service and customer experience.

Q: And would you encourage customers to post complaints on social network sites in order to improve the company's quality and service?

A: Yes, currently we don't do this enough. Because we only have two people in our team and we are afraid that everyone will jump on it at once. Normally this will not happen but... you have to be ready for it, of course. If you encourage people to do so, you should be able to fulfil the promise. But the idea is that when we integrate our social media service in the customer service centre, then we have enough employees to respond and it is the purpose to encourage the use of social media more actively. We also want to tell people, on our flights, as KLM is already doing, 'do you have a question or a remark, contact us through Twitter or Facebook' just because... It's good that people

talk about us, positively or negatively, it's just good that other people also see that, if someone files a complaint, it means they are interested in giving us a second chance. So I see this as an opportunity and therefore we answer every question we get, so it's our philosophy to be as personal as possible and to help the customers as fast as possible and as much as possible. I really want to communicate our customer service on social media in every customer touch point. That is the final goal.

Q: How do you make sure you keep on track of what happens in other departments? If there are problems, I can imagine you receive complaints, but do the employees that aren't at the office inform you?

A: Very often we provide them with feedback, that is the most common. E.g. Someone on board complains about a crew member, about someone at the gate,... but it also works the other way round, that people tell us "look, I had a very difficult customer in the lounge, in the business lounge at the airport, at check-in we had someone very difficult today, and we think that they can post something on Facebook or Twitter." People that are really on track with how we manage social media contact me and they say: "be careful, this is the whole story", and then I keep an eye on whether or not they post something on Facebook or Twitter and I also provide them with feedback. Sometimes we have customers that record the agents of the ticketing desk at the airport because they are not satisfied about something. And then they say, okay, I'm going to post this on Facebook, and then they were recorded or photographed in order to prove their statements.. so that happens.

Q: I can imagine it's very hard for you to react if you don't know the complete story...

A: Yes, that's often very hard. Especially when it comes to phone calls. If someone says they called the call center and they weren't helped in the right way, yeah... it's hard to find out if that is true or not. Who helped them? Because mostly, yeah, sometimes they don't know the name of the employee or they don't mention the name. That's often hard, and yes, the customer is always right but sometimes the customer also abuses his power and tries to get what he wants via Twitter. Then you see his procedure with customer relations has come to an end and then he tries to talk to us in order to get what he wants.

Q; Do you have guidelines about the maximum amount of time you may or can use to investigate a problem?

A: As soon as possible. We have no guidelines for it because we are no... we are no call center so we don't have service levels, we don't operate as a customer service center. Therefore... when it will be integrated in the customer service center, then will we, of course, have time limits, and then we will have a maximum time to spend. But it has to be more than what they get for a call at the moment, because of course, a call center is not used to get calls such as 'my flight has been delayed, why?'. That's not really something that happens. This does happen on social media and in order to investigate the problem, they obviously need the time to inform themselves so the time frame needs to become broader. A lot will need to be adjusted but in the end, it remains customer service.

Q: Would you reward/compensate the people that complain on social media?

A: Not everyone is looking for compensation. Some are just looking for sincere apologies. We often see that that's the case, and some really want money. But of course, saying that the food wasn't good, I think that's very subjective so you can't compensate for that. On the other hand it would be a whole different story if they would find a fly in their food. But when that happens, they will first contact the flight attendants. They will immediately react in order to avoid a complaint on social media. But when they complain on Twitter... it's not that, who complains in public, receives a compensation, not at all... But if it is something where a compensation would be appropriate, then we will compensate, exactly like we do at customer relations or with the call centre. But we really need to investigate if the complaint is legitimate. Some people keep on screaming and shouting until they get something, but it's not because they approach it through Facebook that we will apply different rules. We won't calm them down with money but we can try and say, okay, we can give you Miles (if they are MilesandMore member), or we can, yeah, I don't know... give them an upgrade next time they fly or.. It's not because they complain in public that we will reward them.

Q: I can imagine that would be too easy for them...

A: Yes, and it would encourage others to do it more often.

Q: So you would rather reward them with showing that you understand what the problem is about and help them looking for a solution.

A: Yes, and sometimes it is sufficient to say ‘thank you for notifying, it can only help us to improve our services, and we will pass it on to the department because that’s valuable feedback’. And after that, people feel engaged with your brand and they feel... like they did something right for you. And then they are just happy.

Q: And is 140 characters on Twitter sufficient to provide a decent explanation, or would you, if it’s a complex problem, switch to another medium? Would you call or mail them, or do you like to keep it on the medium they approached to you in the first place?

A: No, we use the medium that is the most suitable for it. And Twitter is very limited, indeed, and certainly in aviation we have some difficult rules to explain, so we would switch to mail. We’ve got a special email address, that’s hello@brusselsairlines.com, and there most people can reach us and then we’ll talk further. I think... it’s the most logical thing to do it that way.

Q: Do you look at who you have in front of you? This may be someone who knows a lot about the problem and is looking for the weaknesses of the company. Do you adapt your style of answering or do you answer everyone in the same way?

A: No, I think it’s really important to approach the customer in the same way he approaches you. Of course, if he starts acting arrogant you don’t have to react in an arrogant way, but it’s really important to feel... what does the customer need, what is he looking for? And actually we need to a bit of a therapist. You need to listen, try and react in the right way, how could you

make them happy, would they be happy enough with this or this... or how would we do it, but if it's someone that is looking for your weaknesses and tries to show that our internal organisations might not function well enough... you can't approve that. We also take care of the reputation, so if that occurs, we need to find a way to work around it. But I really believe in honesty and sincerity, but there are just some things you can't make public. Those are just internal...

Q: When people know less, will you then give explanations in simple wordings? As long as that is possible?

A: Yes, when someone knows a lot about aviation, we will our response will completely be in their style, because they just think that's fun. They think it's amazing to show what they know and to show that they are up-to-date about aviation or that, maybe they ever have worked in aviation. Then we will reply in those terms, such as matriculations of aircraft.. Some people like to show that they know about it, then we will reply them in the same style. Or sometimes we even call maintenance or operations to ask how to explain it and which terms to use.. We definitely do that. And someone, indeed, that doesn't know much, we will approach in his own terms, which is of course logical...

Q: I can imagine that's difficult to figure out

A: Yes, but you feel it rather quickly. Especially when there is someone who never flies and it really doesn't understand. You sometimes have people asking 'how long in advance do I need to be at the airport?'. Yeah, that depends, are you someone who has never been at the airport, yes, then you will need three

hours for an intercontinental flight, but one and a half hour would be enough for someone who flies regularly. So, yeah, sometimes it's hard to know...

Q: Does it also depend on the employee or do you have a fixed communication style?

A: I must say that Claudia and my style match very well. We really respond in the same style.. That's very important, but it's good that people still can see the difference.. that they know 'oh, that's Claudia, that's Kim', of course, everyone has his own style but we form one front. There is one voice but there can be a different tone,.. but we try to talk in the same style. But sometimes we see.. for example, we can see on TwitSpark what the other person is replying, you can see it while they are typing and sometimes.. yeah, sometimes a customer is very difficult and then we really have to look at... right, take some distance, restart, don't reply too quickly because you could make a mistake that way.

Q: Are you aware that Twitter can harm the reputation of the company very badly? Do you anticipate these events?

A: It's so unpredictable that... the only thing you can do is doing what you can, and managing the reputation as good as possible, and if it happens... if we ever get into a storm on Twitter, then it's like that and we should just go with it.. It's not the end of the world because, okay, it harms the brand at that particular moment but it's not like the entire world sees it. Okay, unless we are talking about cases like the Domino's crisis or United Breaks Guitars, those are extreme cases, but I think you can just go with it and try to react as good as possible. Certainly don't try to deny it or... I think it has a lot to do with the

sincerity of the brand. And there are always people that will defend you, normally.

Q: Which specific keywords do you monitor?

A: Yes, we monitor the @FlyingBrussels, obviously, we also monitor #BrusselsAirlines, SN, Sabena, sometimes we also monitor Ryanair. For example when Ryanair started flying, we thought it was important to monitor those tweets. If we have a partnership with the Red Devils, we will monitor that. Depends on the situation but generally it's always BrusselsAirlines.

Q: How do you assess the impact of influentials? Do you look at the amount of followers they have? When you have someone with 1 follower or 10 000 follower, there will be a clear difference in the impact.

A: Yes, that impact will obviously be a lot larger, and especially when someone with a lot of followers complains.. the better you can help them, the....

Q: Do you take that into consideration? Do you treat them differently?

A: Yes, of course. It's the first thing you look at, when someone that does not have a profile picture on Twitter appears, then you know that they have less followers because they don't put much time and effort into it. But it is important, because, it's not because he has no followers that he can't be an important MilesandMore customer. It might be that he's a frequent flyer but that he's not that important on Twitter. So we don't try to make a difference in our approach. But of course, when someone with 200 000 followers asksk a

question, than it's even more important to reply with something funny, because it might have the possibility to get retweeted. We look at the shareability, but we will treat a customer with no followers as good as a customer with a lot of followers.

Q: What do you do with celebrities that can have a large fanbase?

A: We sometimes call them and we try to fix the problem like that, or we try to explain it. But recently we had someone... we need to look at it from the other side, how we can attract customers. It was a well-known editor of 'The Next Web', that's a prominent magazine about everything 'online', so he was very influential in the social media world. And the Spanish air traffic controllers were on a strike. En they stoppd working at certain times, so some Vueling flights couldn't fly, but ours could fly on those certain hours. Of course, Vueling, Spain is their home base, so it's obvious that they had more flights cancelled than we had. But he started a rant on Facebook and Twitter saying that 'I hate vueling and I hate the people that are on a strike, they want to rebook me to two days later and as a consequence I can't be with my wife and kid tonight, and I have an important conference in Brussels tomorrow and'... it was a hassle for him.. And I had seen it because I follow him, but he has more followers than Brussels Airlines, so we reacted just like, 'Hey, maybe we can help you because we would get you home today'. We just called him, he got a small discount, but he paid and he flew home with us. Afterwards, he published a great post on his Facebook page, saying 'Brussels Airlines called me, smiling, and they offered me immediately a solution so I know who I will fly with in the future. And that is of course... that has an impact.

Q: Do the communication tactics change when you receive a complaint that can be harmful for the reputation? Would you organise meetings?

A: Yeah, if it's only Wencke (VP Corporate Communications) and me, our desks are facing each other so we can talk it through immediately. If something like that happens during the weekend, there's always someone on duty. We have managers on duty in the company, so each department has one. We have a crisis room that can be organised. Okay, this won't happen for crisis communication, it's mostly when an operational crisis occurs, but if there's a problem on Twitter that will get out of hand, then we talk it through with the departments that are necessary, and then we look like, okay, what can we do, but mostly this is about a customer relations complaint or someone that has not been treated in the right way on a flight or we've had someone that travelled with us in a wheelchair but the wheelchair broke twice and this has not been communicated well. The person was not helped in a right way, was sent home without wheelchair, yeah.. those are things that... it's something that, very unfortunately went wrong, and then you have to react immediately... otherwise you get the entire minority group against you and that's a sensitive case. So we have to react very quickly.

Q: And how do you adopt the complaint management on social media in your communication strategy?

A: We have a social media strategy, saying, look, this is what we want to reach, we want to be known in Belgium for our social media efforts, that is the communication aspect. We also want to be the most personal airline. That's the

overall company strategy, the customer experience strategy, and we apply social media into it. So we try to apply the social media in every department. We have an overall social media strategy but that one has different aspects, marketing, crisis communication, and customer service.

Q: So it is an important aspect of each department. Do you have much room to decide what you answer?

A: We can decide everything ourselves. We can decide whether we give someone an upgrade or we give someone... we are developing a customer recovery plan on all the different channels where we want to reward people faster for something... or compensating them, in order to avoid a complaint. Where we say, okay, we can give you some miles, then the problem is solved. Of course, if the customer says, no, I don't think that's enough, I wanna go further, then we can go further, but we want to avoid as many complaints as possible by compensating people.

Q: And in which cases do you have to talk to the management or other departments?

A: yes, as an example, someone had a customer relations complaint and he got a no, and he comes back to us and we feel like... don't we have to examine that again? We can't decide, because customer relations has the final say when it comes to refunding (is about a complete refund), then they have the final say, so then I go and talk to them. I'm in touch with them very often, and if they decide, okay, we will reopen the case, or we won't reopen the case but

someone that does not give up or we see that it will get out of hand, we ask them to reopen the case.

Q: Do you have a worst case scenario of when social media can totally get out of hand?

A: A hijack or an accident would be very tough to communicate about, not only because we would get a lot of criticism but it would also be very hard mentally, for us. That's the worst that could ever happen to us as a company. Something lighter, maybe a case as United breaks guitars, where it gets out of hand completely. Where influentials make a big deal out of a case that could happen to a lot of people, and they turn it into a very important event. It's very hard to prepare and sometimes all you can do is going with it.

Unless it's about our own crisis communication, because there we would have control. But if someone decides to bash Brussels Airlines, then we can't really change much. You can try and turn it into a funny situation, but it can be a boomerang on you sooner or later. It's very difficult..

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