The Need For Control In The Service Sector

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Abstract

Factors that play important roles in influencing an individual consumer's need to control in service situations were investigated. A test instrument was developed for two services and several core dimensions were found to be important, i.e., one's proficiency at the task, degree to which the task is convenient to accomplish, and importance to consumer. A refined questionnaire was developed which can be used to predict consumers' willingness to relinquish control. Several managerial implications are then presented.

Introduction

The intangibility of the service offering is an important discriminating feature which distinguishes services from products (Grove and Fisk 1983, Lovelock 1983, Shostack 1977, Zeithaml 1981). When a consumer purchases a product, he can see it, try it out and evaluate whether or not it meets his needs. But he does not have influence over its production. He must simply choose from the available offerings. In contrast, a consumer of a service can participate in and influence its "production". Services are simultaneously produced and consumed; because they are intangible, they are experiential in nature. Although this creates disadvantages for the offeror in terms of uncertainties of quality control, standardization and efficiency, the advantages lie in the fact that the customer's involvement and the resultant tailoring of the offering will help to better meet his needs. The customer's satisfaction with the service can, to a large extent, be monitored directly, and the offering modified to please the consumer, if such action seems desirable (Grove & Fisk 1983; Lovelock 1983; Zeithaml 1981).

A recent study by Hoch and Loewenstein (1991) dealt specifically with the explanation of tactics that consumers use to control their own behavior and maintain self-control in the face of time-inconsistent preferences. In the study, consumer self-control was framed as a struggle between two psychological forces, namely: desire and willpower.

The degree of a customer's willingness to be involved in the service's production can vary from very much to very little. Also, a single consumer may wish to be highly controlling in one service situation, but may expect the offeror to take full responsibility in another. Imagine a customer at a hairdresser's for a haircut and coloring. An illustration of a high need to control is one in which the customer tells the hairdresser exactly how to cut the hair, how long to leave the coloring solution on, and whether to use a scissors or a razor. As the haircut proceeds, the controlling customer carefully monitors the process and interjects with comments whenever he sees fit. As the other extreme, the customer may present his need situation to the provider and ask the offeror to solve his problem as best he can. In this instance the consumer is not even interested in how the service is performed. He only requires a solution to the problem; the rest is up to the provider. This exemplifies complete relinquishment of control. The customer's only requirement of the hairdresser may be to "make me look beautiful". Other relevant examples exist of services where the consumer exercises a great deal of control, but physically is not the recipient of the service, e.g., nursing care for a sick relative.

It is actually perceived control that is a crucial mediating variable between the consumer's emotional and behavioral responses, and the physical environment and the contact personnel which constitute the service encounter. Langer (1983) reviewed many studies with empirical evidence that shows that increased perceived control exerts a significant, positive impact on human physical and psychological well-being.

It is important to recognize that consumers do differ with regard to the conditions under which they choose to retain or relinquish control. According to Lefcourt (1973, p. 424), the accepted notion is that "...the sense of control, the illusion that one can exercise personal choice has a definite and a positive role in sustaining life." This effect has been demonstrated in both labora-

tory and naturalistic settings (e.g., Langer 1983, Rodin and Langer 1977, Schultz 1976). Glass and Singer (1972) described one underlying assumption for this positive role of perceived control as the ability to manipulate our environment reduces stress and anxiety. Averill (1973) found, however, that the relationship between perceived control and stress is not this simple or direct. Specifically, while increased control may reduce stress in some instances, it may increase stress when an individual's abilities to utilize these control mechanisms are limited. Bateson (1985) suggested that service providers must be able to recognize this aspect of the consumer to know how to best present their offering for maximum customer satisfaction. Seemingly, the higher a customer's need to control, the less willing he will be to cede power in a services relationship. This hypothesis was the motivation for the present study.

The study reported herein defines and measures the important situational factors that contribute to the consumer's desire to retain control as he purchases a service. The focus is on the design of a reliable instrument to measure hypothesized contributors to "need to control" variance. Two service situations are tested in order to discover whether the need to control varies within a single consumer as he purchases different services. The factors explored are grounded in psychological theory as important contributors to the need to control phenomenon. The constancy of these antecedents as important contributors to need to control across service settings is also investigated.

Situational Factors Contributing to Need to Control

The reported study represents an attempt to design a reliable instrument which measures situational factors that are hypothesized to contribute to a consumer's need to control. A study by Hui and Bateson (1991) employed an experimental test which confirmed the importance of perceived control in mediating the effects of two situational features of the service encounter -- consumer density (how many consumers present) and choice on the consumer's approach-avoidance responses to the service encounter. Such factors are:

The degree to which a consumer is competent in engaging in a service activity. Arnkoff and Mahoney (1979) claimed that competence describes an individual's skill or internal capability to act. The competence variable is distinct from knowledge or experience, because regardless of whether an individual knows about a service or has previously experienced it, he may or may not be able to handle the situation effectively. Thus, competence is considered a separate construct which impacts positively on an individual's need to control a situation, i.e. the more competent an individual is at performing the activity, the more likely he is to be controlling the service situation.

Convenience is comprised of the time and effort an individual is willing to expend to control a particular situation. According to Bateson (1985), the effort involved in trying to control an outcome may outweigh the potential benefit of gaining that outcome. There is also a general consensus that certain services require greater participative effort than others, e.g., the physical effort of pumping gas or the intellectual effort in a task such as using an automatic teller machine. Jacoby et al. (1976) supported that time is also included in the convenience concept since it is a commodity that is allocated and has definite value.

Enjoyment is the pleasure an individual experiences while being in control of a process, with the process considered an end in itself. Because a service is simultaneously produced and consumed, the enjoyment of the service is the enjoyment of the process. Those who do not enjoy this process may be more likely to relinquish control of it. To support this idea, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, p. 132) suggested a related view of the consumption process for goods. These authors recognize that "consumption has largely to be seen as involving a steady flow of fantasies, feeling and fun encompassed by the experiential view."

Experience refers to actual prior instances in which an individual was involved with a particular service situation. According to Bandura (1977), this may be related to the "performance accomplishment" source of information from which expectations of self-efficacy are derived. Expectations of personal efficacy determine the initiation of coping behavior, the amount of effort expended and the duration for which this behavior will be maintained in the face of adversity. Personal efficacy is heightened through experiences of mastering subjectively threatening situations.

Importance was included in the study because of its face validity in relation to the desire to control construct. One would expect that the importance of a given service situation and its outcome would positively influence the customer's need to control.

The knowledge construct is one with several dimensions. Bandura (1977) claimed that first it may be related to the vicarious experience information source described. One knows about a service and its outcome even though he has not experienced it directly. Second, knowledge may be considered the amount of information an individual possesses. Schorr and Rodin (1984) found this element to affect individuals' desired levels of control. Subjects with higher levels of information exhibited a greater desire to retain control.

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Research Methodology

The Service Situations

A questionnaire was developed based on two service situations, shopping for clothing and making travel arrangements. These were chosen because the degree of customer retention of control may easily vary from one extreme to the other. For example, a person might hire a wardrobe consultant to provide advice and expertise about the type of clothes that best suit him, but not wish him or her to be involved in the actual purchase of clothing (full relinquishment of control). Alternatively, the customer may expect the provider to come along on shopping trips to help choose the clothing (intermediate level of control), or finally, to simply go out alone and purchase the appropriate clothing for himself (full retention of control). Similarly, a travel agent may be hired to purchase airline tickets to an already decided location for a specific date, or may be asked to simply "plan my vacation" (i.e., given full control).

Subjects, Instrument & Procedure

One hundred eight subjects participated in the study. The questionnaire was administered to undergraduate students enrolled in several introductory marketing course sections at a large east coast university. A pretest demonstrated that the subjects had experienced travel and clothes shopping and found the questionnaires relevant.

The questionnaire was composed of two sections, one focusing on each of the two service situations. The two sections were counterbalanced to prevent order effects. Multiple item scales were developed to measure each of the six antecedents to need to control for each of the service situations under study. Items were adapted from prior work by Solomon (1986) concerning attitudes toward clothing and were modified to represent each of the constructs. Table 1 presents the items (55 in total) for the two service situations to which the subjects responded. Table 2 presents verbs and nouns used to describe the six constructs and form the items. Some of the items were expressed in a negative manner to prevent response bias; these were reverse-scored for data analysis purposes.

The instructions given to the subjects are presented in Table 1. Responses to each item were elicited on 5-point Likert (agree/disagree) scales, ranging from -2 (strongly disagree) to +2 (strongly agree), with "0" representing the "do not know, am unsure" category.

Analysis & Results

Correlation analysis revealed that each of the six constructs was highly correlated with the others, so it was concluded that these variables were not discriminating and may rather be parts of several larger constructs. Accordingly, to find a more discriminating latent structure of concepts that help predict a subject's willingness to control in a service situation, two factor analyses were run on the items, one for each situation. The principal components method of estimation was used and a varimax rotation was requested to achieve maximum fit of the data. Items that loaded equally across several factors were eliminated since they were non-discriminating, and the factor analysis was rerun.

Results for each of the service situations are presented in Table 3; the factors were labeled and the items that loaded highly on each of the factors appear in the table. It is evident that factors from the analyses are composites of several of the six originally hypothesized dimensions which in fact were not independent.

The reliabilities of the measures which the factor analyses revealed were tested. Table 4 reports the results of the reliability tests for both situations. The criterion for characterizing a measure as reliable is that its Cronbach's alpha is greater than or equal to .70. In the clothing case, four out of five measures proved to meet the acceptable criteria. The exception was the "social approval" measure. On the other hand, only one measure was highly reliable in the travel situation, namely, "proficiency".

Inspection of these results reveals that: (1) There are three factors which are common across the two service situations used. These might be considered the core factors which are important to the prediction of a consumer's retention/relinquishment of control in any service situation. This core set includes the constructs of ease, proficiency and importance. It should be noted, though, that only the "proficiency" index achieved adequate reliability across both service situations. The emergence of the proficiency factor as the most consistent one confirms the results from prior studies that show that students were more likely to relinquish control to a person perceived as more effective at performing a task. (2) These factors are composites of several of the initially hypothesized antecedents. The clearest example of this is the "proficiency" factor, which is comprised of items initially hypothesized to measure the independent constructs of competence, knowledge and experience. Clearly these are not independent dimensions, but rather components that are manifested in a higher order concept. (3) Other factors seemed very specific to a particular service. For example, the "social approval" factor appeared in the clothing case, but not in travel. This makes intuitive sense, however. Clothing carries with it symbolic meaning and portrays a person's desired image. This element is not necessarily a part of travelling, at least for the student population concerned. For

Table 1
Instructions to the Subjects

"You will be presented with a series of statements regarding your attitude toward shopping for clothing and travelling. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement by circling the number which best represents your feelings".

Clothing

1.   I don't mind spending time to find the right clothes.
2.   I feel I am a very experienced clothes shopper.
3.   I am aware of clothing fashions that are "new" or "in".
4.   I have trouble choosing clothes to fit my lifestyle image.
5.   My reputation at work is affected by the way I am dressed.
6.   Shopping for clothes lifts my spirits.
7.   I have a lot of practice shopping for clothes.
8.   I am able to tell the difference between good and poor quality clothes.
9.   I become aggravated when I have to go shopping.
10.   When I go clothes shopping, it takes too much of my time.
11.   I am able to coordinate colors, patterns or fabrics for my wardrobe.
12.   I like to be considered one of the best-dressed in a group.
13.   I like trying on new clothes.
14.   I think shopping is a waste of time.
15.   I know the right thing to wear for most occasions.
16.   I am confident in my ability to put together a good quality wardrobe.
17.   I rarely go shopping for clothes.
18.   I don't think what a person wears should affect how he is treated by others.
19.   I go clothes shopping just for fun.
20.   I have little experience shopping for my own clothes.
21.   Shopping for clothes is a lot of trouble.
22.   I often read about the current fashion trends.
23.   I have never been able to put together a coordinated outfit.
24.   It's important for me to look well-dressed every day.
25.   I feel that my wardrobe directly reflects my good taste in clothes.
26.   I am able to put together a nice outfit because I put in time and effort looking for the right clothes.
27.   When I can't find the right outfit it's because most stores don't carry the styles I like.
28.   I'm rarely lucky in finding the clothes I like.

Travel

1.   I have never put together my own vacation package.
2.   I don't know how to make travel arrangements.
3.   I find that planning vacations takes a lot of effort.
4.   Travelling is an aggravating experience.
5.   The way that I travel is important to me.
6.   I could never plan an entire vacation myself.
7.   I think making my own travel arrangements is a waste of time.
8.   I am generally unaware of good places to go on vacation.
9.   I spend a lot of time worrying about my travel plans.
10.   In general, I find travelling enjoyable.
11.   I am experienced at making my own travel arrangements.
12.   I can easily put together an entire vacation plan.
13.   If my travel plans don't go well it can ruin my entire trip.
14.   I do not enjoy travelling.
15.   My experience at coordinating travel plans is minimal.
16.   It is easy for me to make travel arrangements myself.
17.   I don't feel comfortable making my own travel arrangements.
18.   I frequently read travel magazines.
19.   I like travelling to new places.
20.   I am confident in my ability to plan and arrange my own vacation.
21.   It is important that travel be "worry free" from beginning to end.
22.   I rarely make travel arrangements.
23.   I don't mind spending time looking for the perfect vacation package.
24.   If my travel plans don't go well, it's because I was unable to properly plan my trip.
25.   With enough effort, I can put together a fantastic vacation package.
26.   When my vacation plans turn out poorly, it's because I didn't have the best travel information available.
27.   Sometimes my success in planning my vacation depends on luck.

Table 2
Words Used to Measure Constructs

VARIABLES	CLOTHING	TRAVEL
Competence	Trouble Confident in my ability Never been able to	Could never do it alone Can easily do it Don't feel comfortable doing it Confident in my ability
Convenience	Time Wast of time Trouble	Takes effort Waste of time Don't mind spending time
Enjoyment	Lifts my spirits Become aggravated Like to do it Do it for fun	Aggravating experience Enjoyable Do not enjoy I like it
Experience	Rarely do it Little experience	Have never done it Am experienced Minimally experienced Rarely do it
Importance	Reputation is affected Like to be considered one of the best Should not reflect Important	Important I spend a lot of time doing it Ruins it if it doesn't go well Must be "worry-free"
Knowledge	Aware Able Know	Don't know how to Unaware of Frequently read about it

It was observed that other variables, besides the three core dimensions, also related specifically to particular situations (travel versus clothing), and they may be important in explaining the variation in willingness to relinquish control. Since key factors are connected to the client, for example, if one knew the proficiency levels of the customers, then one could better gauge how much to control the situation. However, the lack of generalizability of these factors renders them less useful for predictive purposes than the core measures. That is, ideally each case situation would require the design and testing of a new instrument. With the refined questionnaire, only slight modifications are required, but application of the initial questions to other service situations would enhance generalizability of this study's results. The measurements developed herein are meant to provide a starting point for investigating the directionality and strength of the antecedents of need to control and their role within the service encounter.

travel, the factors of "enjoyment" and "interest" which emerged may be more appropriate since travel as described in the questionnaire is a leisure activity.

Conclusions

Several implications may be drawn based on the three "core dimensions" which were found to characterize a consumer's willingness to relinquish control in a service situation. Ultimately, the aim is for managers to be able to assess consumers' levels of ease, proficiency, and importance of the task and adjust their sales pitches accordingly.

Clearly the low reliability of several of the factors in the travel case limits the degree to which the results expressed herein can be used. It is important to test these instruments on more mature populations and in other service situations to ensure that the items are clearly understood and can be used in a reliable fashion.

Suggestions for Future Research

A refined instrument must be developed, which is based solely on the core dimensions of ease, proficiency, and importance (Table 5). Application of the refined questionnaire to other situations would require some slight vocabulary modifications to fit the specific service situation characteristics. The items should again appear with no particular order in the instrument, and some of them should be expressed in a negative manner to prevent response bias. Special attention should, however, be paid when reverse-scoring those items in the data analysis stage. The same 5- or 7-point Likert agree/disagree scales should be used to elicit responses. Following these efforts to refine the reliability and increase the generalizability of the instrument, the three factors can be used as predictive tools in assessing their levels of importance as determinants of consumers' needs to control service encounters. Whether these

Table 3

Factor Analysis Results for the Clothing Case

Factor 1:   Ease (items indicate trouble and time concerns with shopping for clothes)

* Shopping for clothes is a lot of trouble (21)
* When I go clothes shopping, it takes too much of my time (10)
* I think shopping is a waste of time (14)
* I have trouble choosing clothes to fit my lifestyle image (4)
* I become aggravated when I have to go shopping (9)

Factor 2:   Proficiency (items indicate subjects' experience, knowledge, ability and confidence in clothes shopping)

* I have little experience shopping for my own clothes (20)
* I am aware of clothing fashions that are "new" or "in" (3)
* I am able to coordinate colors, patterns or fabrics for my wardrobe (11)
* I know the right thing to wear for most occasions(15)
* I am confident in my ability to put together a good quality wardrobe (16)

Factor 3:   Confidence (items indicate experience, ability and enjoyment when clothes shopping)

* I feel I am very experienced clothes shopper (2)
* I have a lot of practice shopping for clothes (7)
* I am able to tell the difference between good and poor quality clothes (8)
* Shopping for clothes lifts my spirits (6)

Factor 4:   Importance (items indicate how important clothes fashion is to the subject)

* I often read about the current fashion trends (22)
* I like to be considered one of the best-dressed in a group (12)
* It's important for me to look well-dressed every day (24)

Factor 5:   Social Approval (items refer to the association of one's reputation with how he is dressed, and how this affects formation of impressions about one's self)

* My reputation at work is affected by the way I am dressed (5)
* I don't think what a person wears should affect how he is treated by others (18)

Factor Analysis Results for the Travel Case

Factor 1:   Proficiency (items indicate experience, competence and knowledge)

* I have never put together my own vacation package (1)
* I am experienced at making my own travel arrangements (11)
* My experience at coordinating travel plans is minimal (15)
* I rarely make travel arrangements (22)
* I don't know how to make travel arrangements (2)
* I could never plan an entire vacation myself (6)
* I can easily put together an entire vacation plan (12)
* It is easy for me to make travel arrangements myself (16)
* I am confident in my ability to plan and my own vacation (20)
* I don't feel comfortable making my own travel arrangements (17)

Factor 2:   Ease (items indicate the degree to which it is easy and not a waste of time to engage in the activity)

* I find that planning vacations takes a lot of effort (3)
* I am generally unaware of good places to go on vacation (8)
* I spend a lot of time worrying about my travel plans (9)

Factor 3:   Importance (as for the clothes case)

* The way that I travel is important to me (5)
* If my travel plans don't go well, it can ruin my entire trip (13)
* It is important that travel be "worry free" from beginning to end (21)

Factor 4:   Enjoyment (items indicate enjoyment of travel)

* In general, I find travelling enjoyable (10)
* I do not enjoy travelling (14)

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate corresponding item numbers in the initial questionnaire (see Table 1).

Table 4
Reliability Measures of the Factors

FACTOR	CRONBACK 'S	ALPHAS
	CLOTHING	TRAVEL
Ease	.8213	.3789
Proficiency	.7958	.9374
Importance	.7148	.5168
Confidence	.8402	
Enjoyment		.5863
Social Approval	.2104	

situational factors of more personal characteristics carry greater weight in determining need to control is important for service providers to know.   ✍

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Table 5
A Refined·10-item Questionnaire
Based on the Three Core Dimensions

EASE
- I find that ————————— takes a lot of effort.
- When I —————————, it takes too much time.
- I have trouble ——————— .

PROFICIENCY
- I have little experience in ——————— .
- I am able to ——————— myself.
- I am not confident in my ability to ——————— .
- I don't know how to ——————— .

IMPORTANCE
- The way that I ——————— is important to me.
- I like to be considered one of the best in ——————— .
- I often read about (watch) ——————— .

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