

Consumers Who Correspond With Business: A Profile And Measure of Satisfaction With Responses

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Abstract

To investigate the personal characteristics of consumers who correspond with business and their level of satisfaction with businesses' responses, 300 adults were interviewed. Fifty-five percent had written complaint, praise, or inquiry letters to businesses. About half of those consumers receiving responses were highly satisfied with them. Further analysis revealed that consumers' correspondence behaviors and satisfaction with business responses varied according to individual consumer characteristics. Implications and recommendations for nurturing customer satisfaction are discussed.

Introduction

The growth of a service economy in the 1980s helped make apparent the importance of individual consumers. Disparate needs were met with a proliferation of product types and sizes designed to enhance consumer satisfaction under a variety of circumstances. In turn, consumer product markets became very competitive and dictated the need to cultivate and retain customers. One part of that effort involved corresponding with consumers. This correspondence meant interacting with consumers under several conditions: when consumers were pleased, when they were unhappy or, when they simply wanted to ask a question.

Although profiles of complainants exist, relatively little is known about those consumers who write praise and inquiry letters (Martin and Smart 1988). Also, little work has focused on examining consumers' reactions to complaint resolution (Gilly 1987). In addition, many of the studies that added to the knowledge of consumer correspondent attributes were completed before the need to be proactive in corresponding with consumers was widely recognized.

In light of the new focus on better meeting consumer needs and providing superior service, it is time to reassess and add to what we know about consumer correspondents. Consequently, the study reported here was undertaken to provide both an up-to-date profile of consumer correspondents and a measure of their satisfaction levels with the responses they received.

Background

Socioeconomic Profiles

As mentioned previously, the majority of what is known about consumer correspondents focuses on complainants. An early study of dissatisfied consumers found that those who took action by writing letters had a strong interest in consumerism, were younger and above average in terms of social status, income, education and group membership than were those who took no action (Warland, Herrman and Willits 1975). Continuing to look at differences between complainants and non-complainants, the Technical Assistance Research Programs Institute, in an extensive review of the complaint literature, concluded that several factors influenced consumer complaint behavior. These included the severity of the problem, household income, age and geographic region of the household (TARP 1986). A previous study of 2,513 households found that race and urban residence (versus rural residence) did not produce differences in the incidence of complaint letter submissions (TARP 1976).

Another study supported the TARP research, findings that younger consumers with higher income and education levels were more likely to complain (Ross and Oliver 1984). Still another study, however, provided only mixed confirmation of the TARP research (Kraft 1977). While this latter research did find age to be inversely related to dissatisfied consumers' propensity to complain, "no significant differences in terms of educa-

tion and income were found" (p. 83). Dissatisfied consumers who were married, white, and employed outside the home also were found to be more likely to voice their complaints.

Information on consumers who write complimentary or praise letters to businesses is sparse. However, two notable studies investigated the content of hotel comment cards, a form similar to letter writing, containing praise as well as some behavioral and demographic variables related to the customer usage of the cards. One found that complainers differed from complimenters in that the latter were older, had lower incomes and were more brand loyal to the hotel chain than were complainers (Robinson and Berl 1980).

The second of these two comment card studies found that guests loyal to the hotel chain were equally likely to use comment cards to voice a complaint or compliment to the business, but that younger consumers and those consumers with lower incomes were more likely to compliment the hotel than to lodge a complaint. The study also found that both males and females were more likely to compliment than to complain, but that females were more inclined to use comment cards for either purpose than were males (Lewis 1983).

While other studies examine consumer correspondence, most do not compare writers with non-writers but rather look at issues such as incidence of replies, response speed, content, personalization, and measures of satisfaction.

Satisfaction

Satisfying consumers makes good business sense. Some estimates show that it costs as much as six times more to get a new customer than it does to keep a current one (Rosenberg and Czepiel 1984). Not only is the consumer's future decision to buy again from that company at risk, but so is the likelihood of negative word-of-mouth communications to others that could affect the buying decisions of many more people (Anonymous 1981). Consequently, whether the consumer is satisfied with a company's response to his/her letter is a critical issue.

In general, higher levels of satisfaction have been reported with receiving a response (Pearson, Hoskins and Gazda 1980; Resnik, Gnauck and Aldrich 1977), with speedy responses (Gilly and Gelb 1982), with the perception of a speedy response rather than the actual amount of time elapsed (Gilly 1987), and with the type of response (Pearson, Hoskins and Gazda 1980; Pickle and Bruce 1972).

Varying levels of consumer satisfaction with complaint handling outcomes are evidenced in the literature. In

the 1976 TARP study, those obtaining satisfactory resolution and those reporting completely unsatisfactory results were evenly split at slightly over 40 percent. A strong relationship between the severity of the problem and complainant satisfaction was observed later (TARP 1986). The less severe the problem, the higher the level of reported consumer satisfaction with the response. This finding is especially enlightening as it relates to consumer correspondence handling in that many letters written to businesses have to do with relatively small problems, compliments or inquiries. The opportunity to satisfy the correspondent and foster a solid relationship with that consumer appears to be very good.

Objectives

As can be seen from the previous discussion, understanding consumer correspondents and their levels of satisfaction with a business' response can be a valuable tool in developing appropriate managerial strategies. As we progress through the 1990s the socio-economic attributes of consumers undoubtedly will continue to evolve, as will business response to those consumers who take the time to correspond with them. Unfortunately, yesterday's research may no longer be relevant in today's marketplace. Therefore, it is an appropriate time to reassess what is known about consumer correspondents. In short, what is the current profile of consumer correspondents, and how do complainants differ from consumers who write complimentary or inquiry letters? Specifically, the study reported here sought to: (1) Assess socio-economic differences between consumers who have written letters to businesses and those who have not; (2) Evaluate if differences exist between different types of correspondents (i.e., complainants, praisers and inquirers); (3) Evaluate if differences exist between consumer correspondents who were satisfied with the response they received and those who were not; and (4) Provide recommendations to practitioners to help them best utilize their resources to satisfy consumer correspondents.

Methodology

To satisfy the objectives of the study, door-to-door interviews were conducted with 300 adult consumers in a medium-size Southwestern city. Respondents in these middle class neighborhoods were asked a series of general questions pertaining to their past experiences, if any, in writing consumer letters to businesses.

Next, respondents were asked to recall a few specific details regarding the most recent letter they had written to a business: the type of letter (i.e., complaint, praise, inquiry), whether or not the business responded to the letter, and if so, their degree of satisfaction with the response. Only nine respondents were unable to recall the necessary information and, for the affected variables,

these respondents were eliminated from subsequent analysis.

Demographic information also was solicited for classificational purposes. These variables included age, gender, marital status, education, household income, occupation, and number of hours employed weekly.

Data analysis included first compiling descriptive summary statistics and frequencies. Consumer satisfaction was measured using the D-T satisfaction scale with response alternatives (coded 7-1) including: "Delighted, Pleased, Mostly Satisfied, Mixed (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied), Mostly Dissatisfied, Unhappy, Terrible" (Westbrook 1980). Finally, routine measures of association (Chi-square analyses) and differences (t-tests, analyses of variance) were employed, with appropriate consideration given to each variable's respective level of measurement and distribution properties.

Findings and Discussion

Correspondence Behaviors and Consequences

Frequency of Consumer Correspondence. As summarized in Table 1, 165 respondents (55.4 percent) reported having previously written at least one consumer letter

to a business. Fifty-six respondents (18.8 percent) reported having written two or more consumer letters. The findings reinforce previous research which indicates the proportion of consumers who do occasionally correspond with business is not insignificant, and therefore should not be ignored (Martin and Smart 1989).

Type of Businesses Written. Of those respondents who have written letters, most (60.6 percent) report writing to a manufacturer, possibly because written correspondence may be perceived as the most feasible channel of communication available to reach this group of businesses. In contrast, fewer respondents reported writing to service businesses and retailers--possibly because these types of businesses are often located locally and consumers may have ample opportunity to communicate with these businesses over the telephone or in person.

Type of Letters Most Recently Written. Most of the literature pertaining to consumer correspondence focuses on complaint letters (Martin and Smart 1988). However, the findings of the current study suggest that praise and inquiry letters constitute a significant proportion of consumer correspondence to businesses. Thirty-one respondents (19.5 percent) reported most recently

Table 1: Summary of Correspondence Behaviors

Number of Consumer Letters Written To Businesses	Frequency (percent)
No letters (never written)	133 (44.6)
One letter	109 (36.6)
Two letters	29 (9.7)
Three or more letters	27 (9.1)
Total	298 (100.0)
Type of Businesses Written (some multiple responses)	
Manufacturers	100 (60.6)
Service Businesses	73 (44.2)
Retailers	58 (35.2)
Other Businesses	16 (9.7)
Total	247 (149.7)
Type of Letters Most Recently Written	
Complaint	101 (63.5)
Praise	31 (19.5)
Inquiry	27 (17.0)
Total	159 (100.0)

writing a praise letter--complimenting businesses' goods, services, employees, and promotions. An additional 27 respondents (17.0 percent) most recently wrote a business for information--requesting brochures and other promotional literature, information regarding product/service availability, and maintenance and operating information. Finally, 101 (63.5 percent) of the corresponding consumers lodged a complaint with a business.

Business Response Rates. A total of 108 respondents reported that the business they most recently wrote to did answer their letter, while another 42 specifically recalled that the business did not answer. These findings would suggest an overall business response rate of 72 percent (see Table 2). Knowing that business responds

to approximately 72 percent of consumer letters does provide some insight into corporate correspondence-handling practices, although other studies have documented both higher business response rates (Ciervo 1980; Clark et al 1985; Lewis 1983), and lower business response rates (Pearson, Hoskins and Gazda 1980).

However, it is especially noteworthy to recognize the high proportion of consumers who remembered whether or not they received a response. Although some respondents had not written a consumer letter in several years, only nine could not remember whether or not the business had responded--in contrast to 150 respondents who clearly remembered. Apparently, the business' response (or lack thereof) is, in itself, a high-impact communication.

Table 2: Summary of Consequences of Correspondence Behaviors

Business Response to Most Recently Written Consumer Letter	Frequency (percent)	
All Letters		
Response Received	108	(67.9)
Response Not Received	42	(26.4)
Can't Remember	9	(5.7)
Total	159	(100.0)
Complaint Letters		
Response Received	69	(68.3)
Response Not Received	29	(28.7)
Can't Remember	3	(3.0)
Total	101	(100.0)
Praise Letters		
Response Received	19	(61.3)
Response Not Received	9	(29.0)
Can't Remember	3	(9.7)
Total	31	(100.0)
Inquiry Letters		
Response Received	20	(74.1)
Response Not Received	4	(14.8)
Can't Remember	3	(11.1)
Total	27	(100.0)
Consumer Satisfaction With Business Response to Most Recently Written Consumer Letter	Mean Satisfaction	Standard Deviation
Response to Complaint Letters	5.10	1.37
Response to Praise Letters	6.05	0.62
Response to Inquiry Letters	5.53	0.96
All Letters	5.35	1.25

Another finding of interest is the absence of a statistically significant relationship between the type of consumer letter (i.e., complaint, praise, inquiry) and whether or not the business responded (Chi-square = 2.6, d.f. = 2, p-value = 0.27). Apparently, the typical business' decision to respond to a consumer letter is not dependent upon whether the letter is derogatory, flattering, or inquisitive.

Consumer Satisfaction With Business Responses.

Another investigated consequence of consumer correspondence was the degree of consumer satisfaction achieved by the businesses' responses. That is, how satisfied were the 106 consumers who reported having received business responses to their letters? Further, were satisfaction levels related to the type of consumer letters written, with complaining consumers, for example, less likely to be satisfied than praising or inquiring consumers? These questions were investigated using the D-T satisfaction scale, with possible satisfaction scores ranging from one (low satisfaction) to seven (high satisfaction).

For the 106 respondents who reported receiving a business response, a mean satisfaction score of 5.35 was observed, with a standard deviation of 1.25. The 5.35 mean suggests that responses were generally satisfying. However, it should be noted that only 15 consumers (14.2 percent) reported being fully satisfied. Moreover, consumer satisfaction was not measured among those consumers who received no business response to their letter. Consequently, it would appear that substantial opportunity still exists for businesses to improve the satisfaction potency of their correspondence to consumers.

Among the three basic types of consumer letters, it was not surprising to find that business responses were least satisfying in response to complaint letters (mean = 5.10). Conversely, praise and inquiry letters tended to evoke more satisfying business responses, with means of 6.05 and 5.53, respectively ($F = 4.8$, $p = 0.01$).

Demographic Characteristics. The next phase of the analysis investigated the extent to which the aforementioned consumer correspondence behaviors and satisfaction levels varied according to selected demographic variables. Generally, few statistically significant relationships were found, with noteworthy exceptions discussed below. Knowledge of these relationships promises to assist businesses in their efforts to more efficiently and effectively market programs designed to cultivate consumer feedback.

Age. As illustrated in Exhibit 1, respondents who have written one or more consumer letters to businesses tend to be about 3.6 years older than those respondents who have never written a consumer letter ($t = 2.2$, $p =$

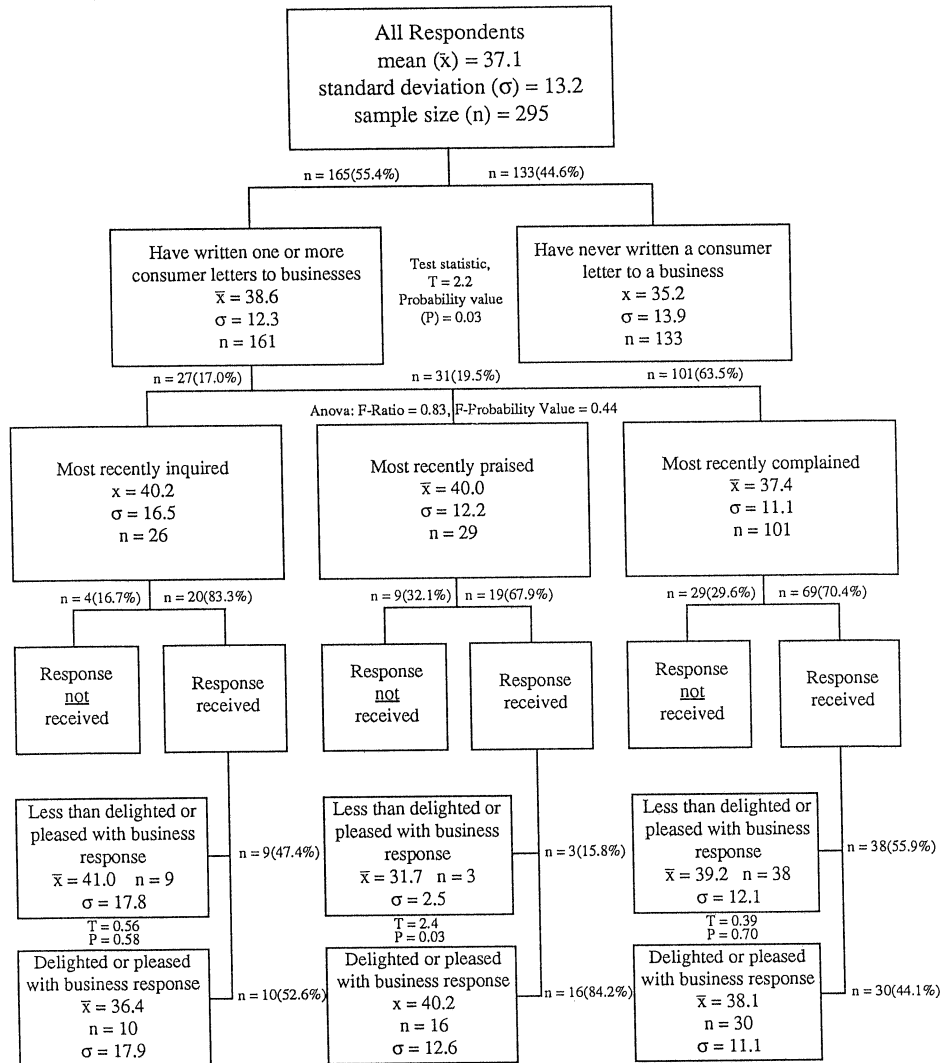
0.03). At least two possibilities may be advanced to account for this difference. First, it could be that older consumers tend to be more assertive and therefore do not hesitate to write letters when the perceived need to communicate arises. However the findings of earlier studies suggest otherwise (Kraft 1977; Ross and Oliver 1984). If younger consumers are less assertive, programs to encourage consumer feedback should be directed especially toward younger consumers. As a second possible explanation, it may be that younger consumers are equally assertive, but choose to utilize different communication vehicles when asserting themselves--such as toll-free hotlines, customer comment cards, personal contact, and so on. Future research should attempt to measure these preferences, and consumer feedback programs designed with communication vehicles appropriate for the targeted audience of consumers.

Education. Exhibit 2 shows no statistically significant differences between education and correspondence behaviors. However, education may be related to consumer satisfaction in that respondents most satisfied with businesses' responses to their complaint letters tended to have 1.1 fewer years of education than consumers who were less satisfied with the responses to their complaint letters ($t = 1.8$, $p = 0.08$). It may be that as education levels throughout our society tend to generally rise, businesses will find it increasingly difficult to please the more knowledgeable, more demanding consumer.

Gender. In the present study, there is little evidence to indicate that males and females differ in their correspondence behaviors, despite previous research that suggested females are more likely to provide feedback to business (Lewis 1983). However, as Exhibit 3 indicates, females do tend to be more satisfied with business correspondence they receive in response to their complaint letters. This finding would seem to suggest that males have higher (or at least different) response expectations of business than do females. Knowing this, businesses might consider responding differentially to complaint letters written by males versus those written by females.

Number of Hours Employed Weekly. Exhibit 4 shows that correspondence behaviors and satisfaction are generally unrelated to the number of hours consumers are employed weekly. One apparent exception is the gap of more than nine hours between those consumer correspondents who have most recently written complaint letters and those who have most recently written praise or inquiry letters ($F = 3.4$, $p = 0.03$). It may be that consumers who are employed full time have greater expectations of business performance than do part time and unemployed consumers. If so, businesses marketing products likely to be used by full time employees (e.g.,

Exhibit 1: Descriptive Profile of Respondents' Age



work clothes, business suits) might emphasize quality in their product designs and in their communications with consumers.

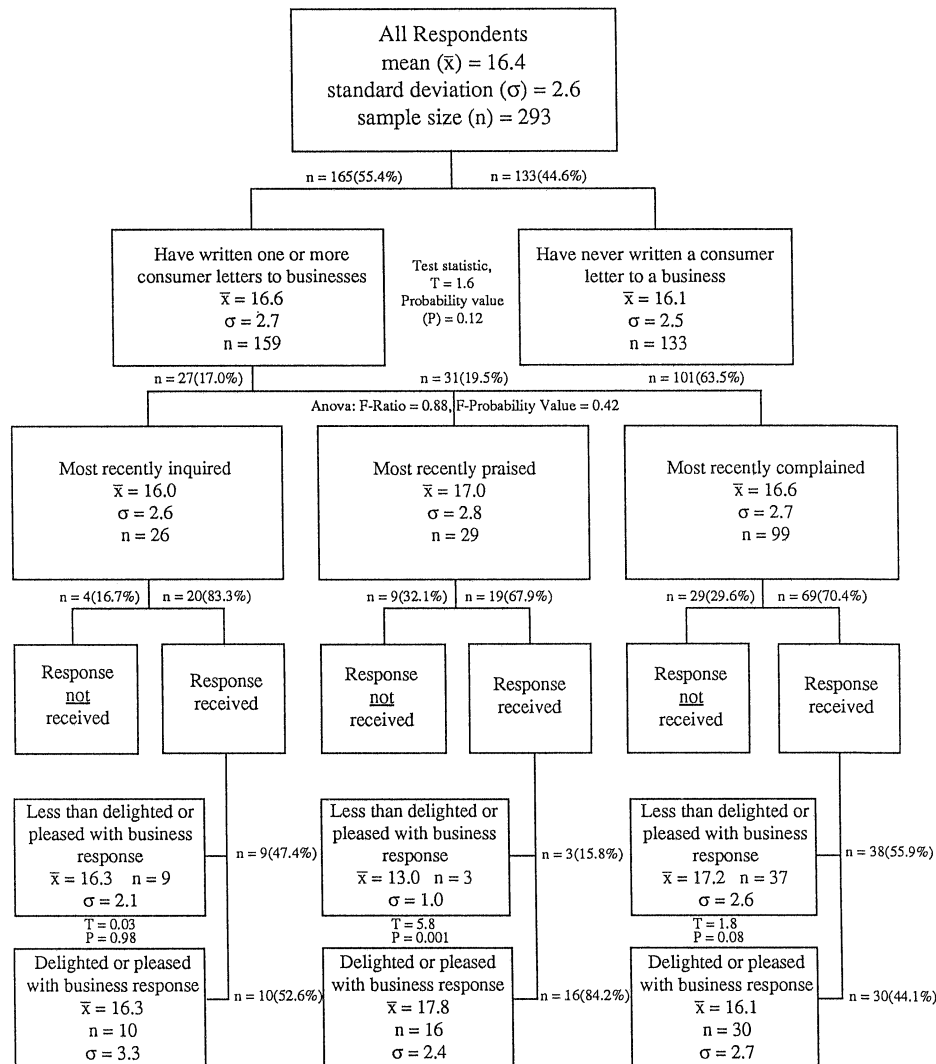
Household Income. One significant difference was observed with respect to household income. As shown in Exhibit 5, a difference of almost \$6,300 separates the mean annual household income of those respondents who reported having written one or more consumer letters from those claiming to have never written a consumer letter ($t = 2.3, p = 0.02$). Consumers with higher incomes tend to be more assertive in terms of corresponding with business. Therefore, businesses that attempt to appeal to these more affluent consumers should especially be cognizant of the increased opportunities to cement customer relations through an effective correspondence handling program.

Marital Status. As illustrated in Exhibit 6, the corre-

spondence behavior and satisfaction of married respondents generally paralleled that of unmarried respondents. However, married respondents were found to be more likely to have written consumer letters than were unmarried respondents (Chi-square = 12.6, d.f. = 1, $p = 0.00$). Again, businesses interested in appealing to married individuals should be aware of the disproportionate assertiveness of these consumers, and be prepared to respond effectively.

Occupation. Despite earlier findings that occupation is significantly related to complaining behavior (Kraft 1977), no evidence was found in the present study to suggest that occupation is in any way related to consumer correspondence behaviors and/or consumer satisfaction with business responses (see Exhibit 7). These findings were somewhat surprising in that one might intuitively expect a greater proportion of white-collar employees to have written letters-based on the assump-

Exhibit 2:
Descriptive Profile of Respondents' Education



tion that these employees are more likely to deal with job-related correspondence, and therefore likely to feel more comfortable in writing consumer letters than would be their blue-collar counterparts.

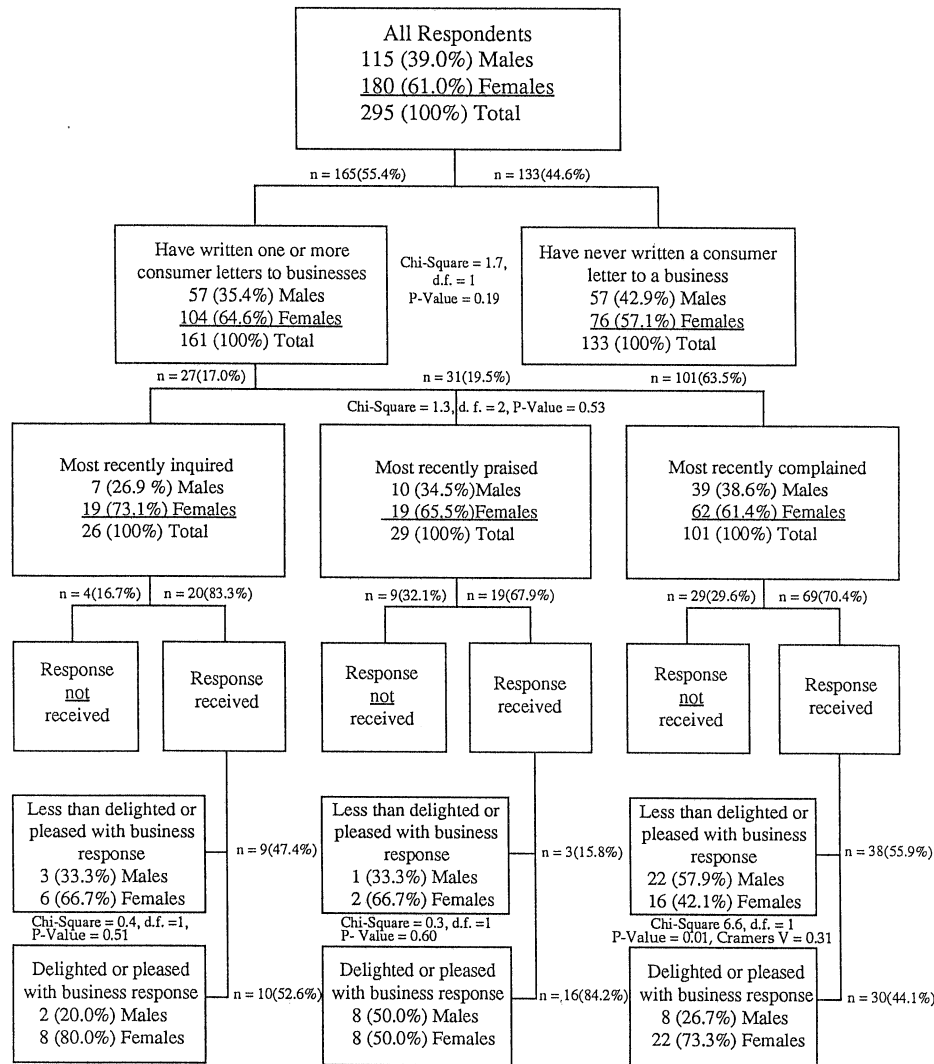
Summary of Findings

During the 1980s businesses increasingly realized that their correspondence handling practices influence customer satisfaction and loyalty, and is therefore in businesses' best interest to carefully and thoughtfully respond to consumer letters. The available literature that otherwise might assist the business practitioner is generally out of date and focuses on customer complaints without consideration for other types of consumer correspondence--namely praise and inquiry letters. Consequently, 300 consumers were interviewed to document a number of their correspondence behaviors.

The consequences of those behaviors were also investigated, with these findings further analyzed by demographic segments. The following highlights some of the study's key findings:

- * Most (55.4 percent) consumers have written at least one consumer letter to a business. Many (18.8 percent) have written two or more consumer letters.
- * Older, married, and higher income consumers are more likely to have written a consumer letter than have younger, unmarried, and lower income consumers.
- * Consumers most often write to manufacturers (60.6 percent), then to service businesses (44.2 percent), and finally to retailers (35.2 percent).

Exhibit 3: Descriptive Profile of Respondents' Gender



- * Consumers are most likely to complain to business (63.5 percent), although praise and inquiry letters are not uncommon (19.5 and 17.0 percents, respectively).
- * The number of hours worked on the job is positively related to the consumer's propensity to write a complaint letter, rather than a praise or inquiry letter.
- * Businesses responded to 72 percent of all consumer letters, with response rates varying little with the type of consumer letters.
- * A high proportion of respondents (94.3 percent) distinctly remembers whether or not the business responded.
- * Those consumers receiving a business response to

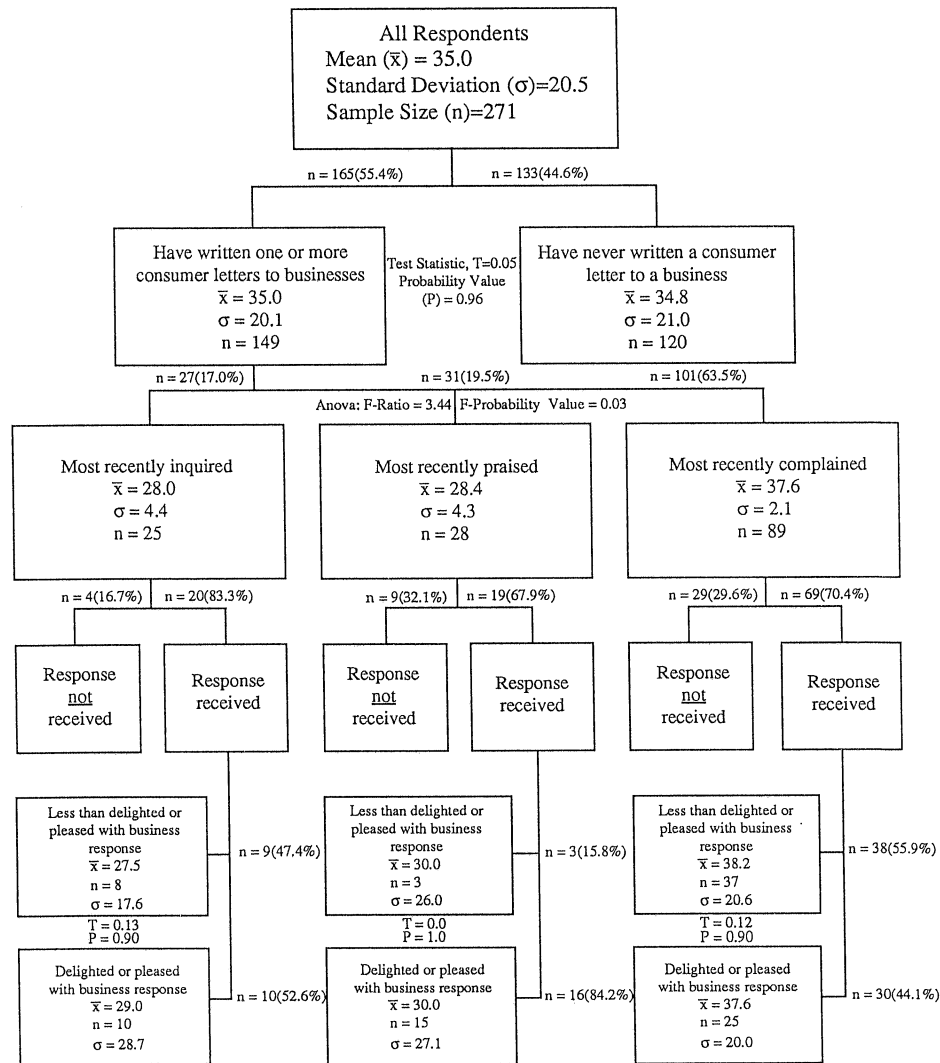
their letter generally are satisfied (mean satisfaction = 5.35 of possible 7.00), although responses to complaint letters tend to be significantly less satisfying (mean = 5.10) than those to praise (6.05) or inquiry (5.53) letters.

- * Female consumers and those consumers with less education tend to be more satisfied with businesses' response to their complaint letters, than are male consumers or those with higher levels of education.

Concluding Comments

As businesses try to distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive marketplace, more and more are recognizing the importance of consumer correspondence handling. This interaction provides a special opportunity to leave a positive impression with a con-

Exhibit 4:
Descriptive Profile of Respondents' Hours Employed Weekly



sumer who was pleased, upset or inquisitive enough to write a letter (i.e., praise, complaint or inquiry) to the company. In order to develop appropriate strategies to take the most advantage of each correspondence situation, it is necessary to have a general understanding of consumer correspondents and the differences and similarities among them.

The findings reported here add further support to making every effort to appropriately correspond with consumers. Not only did a majority of those questioned write at least one letter to a business, but almost 95 percent of those who wrote distinctly remembered whether a response was received. Obviously, the level of involvement required to write the letter suggests that the response will be equally important. By now it is becoming fairly routine that most correspondence is

acknowledged by the company. Even at that, more than one of every four consumer correspondents reported receiving no response. While some responses may have been sent and not remembered, constructing a memorable response also should be a goal.

The next important issue is the level of satisfaction the consumer receives from the response. Although satisfaction levels were generally high, significant differences between responses received to praise, inquiry and complaint levels were found. While it is not surprising that the lowest satisfaction levels were found for responses to complaint letters, nevertheless, businesses should be concerned with those differences. Individual businesses would be well-served in determining whether responses to their letters elicit a similar hierarchy of satisfaction. If so, response strategies could

be tested to find ways to maximize consumer satisfaction and, ultimately, reinforce company goodwill and brand loyalty.

Finally, businesses should continue to monitor socio-economic characteristics of consumer correspondents. This study supports some earlier findings that typical correspondents tend to be slightly older, married and with higher incomes. As educational levels continue to rise, different responses may be necessary. For example, typical form letters or very general responses that do not address specific issues raised in the initial letter may be viewed less favorably.

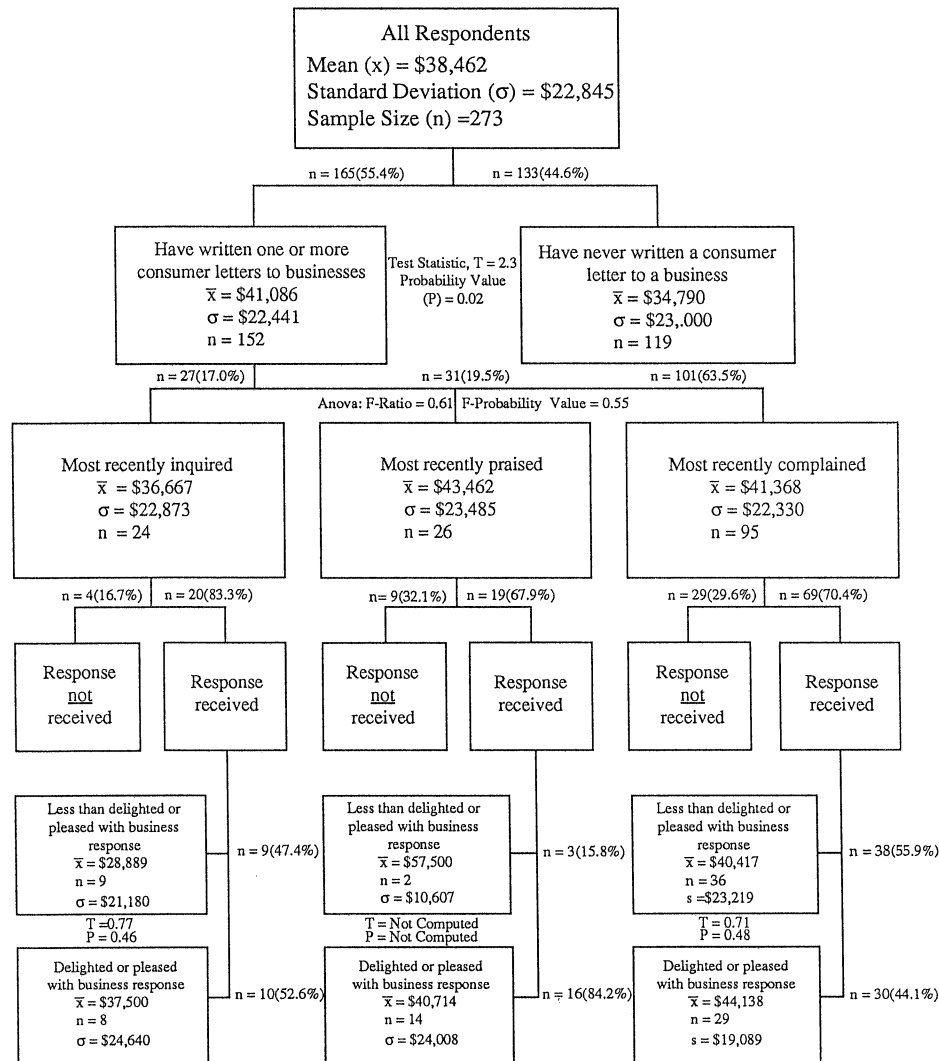
Keeping in mind the difficulty and expense that may be incurred in trying to gain new consumers reinforces

the great value that a business can get from being concerned and proactive with correspondence handling details, thereby increasing the likelihood of retaining those customers who are already involved enough to take the time to write.

Suggestions For Future Research

At least three avenues for future research are apparent. First, given that consumers appear to have higher expectations and be more assertive today than in years past, it is likely that consumer correspondence practices, profiles and satisfaction will continue to evolve in the future. Therefore, future research efforts might track these changes over time. Another possibility for future research is the investigation of other consumer charac-

Exhibit 5:
Descriptive Profile of Respondents' Income



teristics that might relate to consumer correspondence practices and satisfaction. For example, are high-volume product users more likely to correspond than low-volume users? Are some personality types more likely to be satisfied with corporate responses to their letters than are other personality types? And so on. Finally, many of the same issues addressed in the current manuscript might be investigated in the context of alternative feedback mechanisms. For example, who is the "typical" consumer who calls the firm's toll free "800" number or fills out a customer comment card? And how do consumer satisfaction levels differ across these feedback alternatives? As corporate interest in cultivating consumer input grows, so will the importance of addressing these and other important consumer issues.

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Exhibit 6:
Descriptive Profile of Respondents' Marital Status

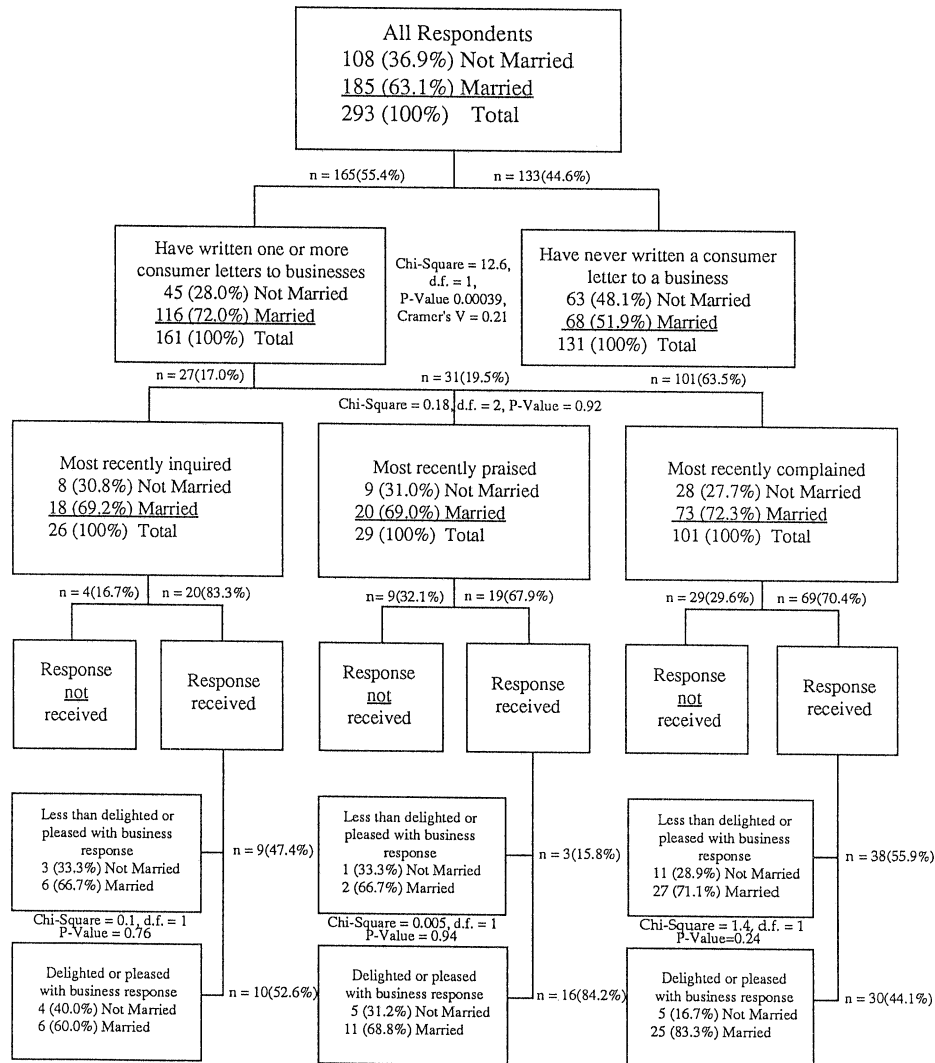
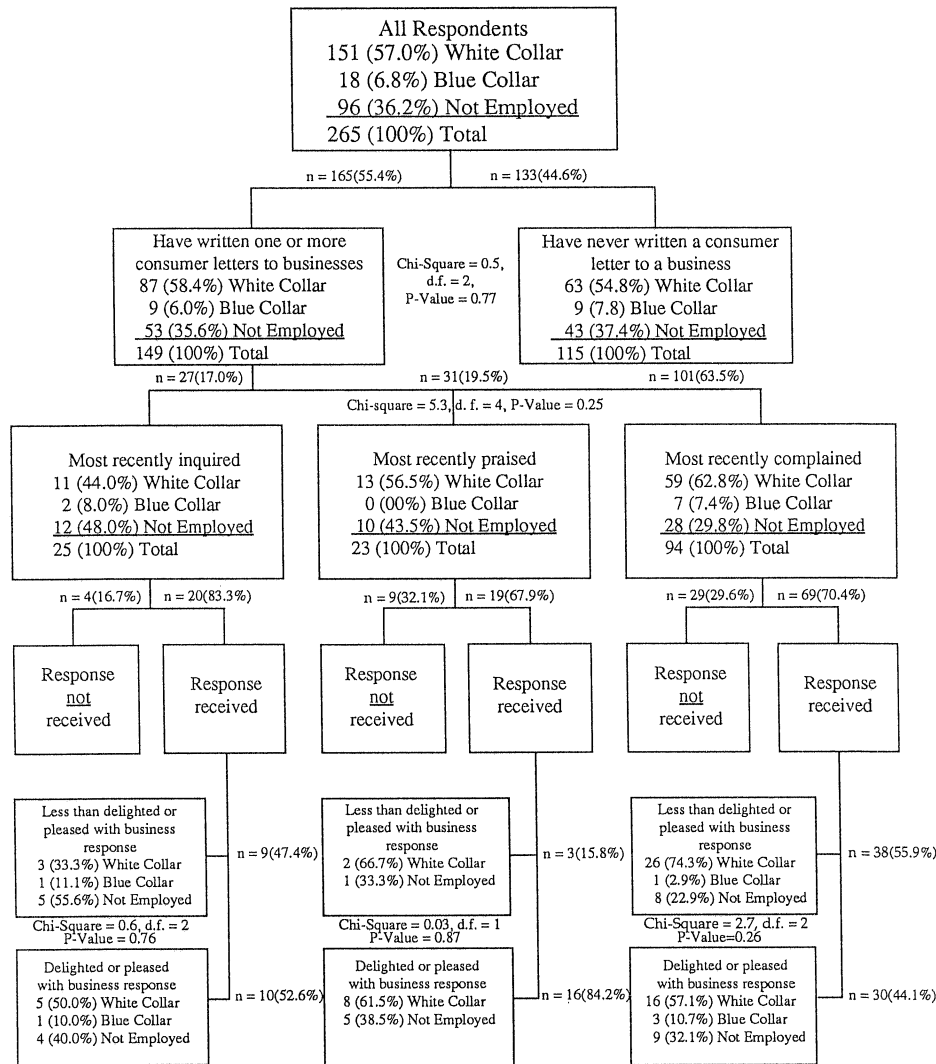


Exhibit 7: Descriptive Profile of Respondents' Occupation



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