

Characteristics of Customer Advocacy in a Services Context

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Abstract

Customer advocacy represents the highest level of customer loyalty. However, there is little published research indicating the distinctive characteristics of customer advocacy. Interview data in this study reveals that advocates make enthusiastic and explicit recommendations. They are proactive in promoting service providers and act as the salesperson while downplaying competitors. They also demonstrate strong beliefs and support towards service providers. All these aspects are not necessarily obvious in many word-of-mouth interactions. The paper also offers suggestions for future research and practical implications for service providers.

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Customer advocacy represents the highest level of customer loyalty. However, there is little published research indicating the distinctive characteristics of customer advocacy. Interview data in this study reveals that advocates make enthusiastic and explicit recommendations. They are proactive in promoting service providers and act as the salesperson while downplaying competitors. They also demonstrate strong beliefs and support towards service providers. All these aspects are not necessarily obvious in many word-of-mouth interactions. The paper also offers suggestions for future research and practical implications for service providers.

Introduction

Customer advocacy is a comparatively new concept in the marketing literature. An advocate is “someone who actively recommends you to others, who does your marketing for you” (Peck et al., 1999, p.45). As advocates exhibit extra-role customer behaviours such as actively promoting the organization to others and even defending the company against detractors, advocacy has been recognized as the ultimate test of customers’ relationship with the organization (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne, 1991; Cross and Smith, 1995). Therefore, customer advocacy is an ultimate goal for a company in achieving its sustainable competitive position (Urban, 2004).

Despite its vital importance, the characteristics of customer advocacy remain unclear. Advocacy has been used interchangeably with positive word-of-mouth (hereafter ‘WOM’) (e.g., Lawer and Knox, 2006; White and Schneider, 2000), or defined as recommendations (e.g., Peck et al., 1999). As WOM is a broad term including recommendations (Swan and Oliver, 1989), advocacy is essentially a form of WOM, which is the informal, person-to-person communication between non-commercial communicators (Harrison-Walker, 2001). In particular, advocacy is strongly expressed recommendations (Wilson, 1994). However, the specifics of these strong expressions have rarely been explored, with respect to the content, the language or the manner, which are important dimensions underlying a WOM message (Mazzarol, Sweeney and Soutar, 2007; Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol, 2008b). This gap reflects the notion that many conceptualizations of WOM are still simplistic (Mazzarol, Sweeney and Soutar, 2007). WOM literature is mainly focused on the valence and the frequency of WOM activities (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1996), with much less attention on the message itself and the process by which the message is delivered. However, recent research presents a couple of exceptions, for example, Mazzarol, Sweeney and Soutar (2007) and Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol (2008b; 2008a). These considerations lead to the research questions: *What are the characteristics of customer advocacy? How is it different from and similar to general positive WOM?*

East et al. (2008) observe that the strength of WOM expression has a significant influence on its effectiveness. Understanding the characteristics of the strong expression (i.e. customer advocacy) will assist in explaining the variation in impact. Further, this understanding will help to establish a starting point to achieve the differential impact. With new levels of consumer sophistication (Macdonald and Uncles, 2007) leading to increasing availability and

amount of WOM information (Bernoff and Li, 2008), an effective way for an organization to stand out is to gain a greater number of strong recommendations. The identification of the features of advocacy will assist its further measurement and promotion by organizations.

Methodology

This study chooses a service context, based on the greater desirability of WOM in sectors where low comparability and few search qualities exist, such as services (e.g., Brown *et al.*, 2005; File, Judd and Prince, 1992). A qualitative approach was employed to explore insightful meaning of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 1994). Eleven exhaustive interviews were conducted with adult customers recruited through convenience sampling. Interviewees were aged from 22 to 64 years with a balance between the genders, covered a wide range of occupations (e.g., dental technician, IT director and defence force), education levels and nationalities. They have made a very strong recommendation (score 9 or 10 out of 10) about a service provider within the past six months. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes, allowing individuals to discuss their own experiences in depth and at length.

The interviews were semi-structured. Each interviewee was asked about the nature of the service they recommended and the details of how they have strongly recommended the service provider. Interviewees were also asked to separately recall other service providers about which they gave positive comments, but not with the same level of strength. This facilitated the comparison between advocacy and positive WOM in the analysis. Following the process outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), verbatim transcripts of the interviews and field notes were coded. Concept frequencies were calculated and recurring themes within the data were identified to represent relevant advocacy facets. Further, the themes were grouped by their conceptual consistency to establish characteristics of advocacy. These themes were confirmed as relevant in subsequent checking with two informants.

Results

The analysis reveals certain themes of customer advocacy, centred on what is advocated and how the advocacy is delivered. These themes can be categorized into four areas:

Language - explicit, highly positive and descriptive: The first noticeable feature of advocacy is the language used in the recommendations. It tends to be very direct and explicit.

“I’d say here is his email address why don’t you get in touch with him. I couldn’t recommend him more highly. He really, really helped.”(Informant 1)

“This guy is brilliant. You should definitely call this guy.”(Informant 2)

This explicitness distinguishes advocacy from positive WOM, as many customers are concerned that the listener might not have the same experience, therefore they are uncomfortable offering direct and explicit recommendations even in positive WOM conversations (Mazzarol et al. 2007).

Accompanying these explicit recommendations is firm and descriptive language about the experience with the service provider. Adjectives indicating superiority such as ‘really great’,

'superb' are commonly used. Informants also give clear details regarding why and how the service provider is superior. In contrast, the language used in their general positive WOM conversations is milder, involving less emotive and definite words such as 'good', 'not bad', 'they did the job'. Consequently, the degree of positivity and descriptiveness in the conversation is greatly reduced:

"(I was) not just saying it's great. So why is it great, what the service was like, what the whole purchase experienced was like. There is a different excitement and energy about it as opposed to say, when I used to recommend Optus in the past. It was - yeah they're okay, they did the job, they're all the same. Whereas now it's like - it is superb value for money. It is just quite different." (Informant 4)

Manner – enthusiastic and proactive: Enthusiasm and emotion are apparent in advocacy. These are conveyed through both verbal expressions and body language. This corresponds to the reciprocal relationship between emotions and WOM, in which emotional state influences the occurrence of postpurchase communication; also customers use these conversations to gratify their emotional needs (Dichter 1966; Westbrook 1989). In advocacy, the emotion is delivered in a much stronger manner. Informants describe themselves as 'enthusiastic' and 'passionate', whereas the delivery of normal WOM communications can be more subdued.

"Well the difference (between normal positive comment and strong recommendation) is it's very plain. Once again there's just no, what do you call it, that passion." (Informant 11)

"When I say manner, it's probably animated. A few hands flying around. Eye contact. So that they know that I'm genuine about what I'm saying." (Informant 6)

Being proactive is another distinctive feature of advocacy. WOM is most often generated by listeners' direct inquiries (Mangold, Fred and Gary, 1999). Interestingly, this does not necessarily hold true in advocacy. Advocates tend not to wait until listeners ask for advice; instead, they proactively mention the service provider whenever there is a relevant conversation, without being asked.

"So once I heard someone was talking about this general topic and the need to find a dermatologist then I am proactive. I don't wait for them to ask me." (Informant 7)

"Any time the topic came up you would need to say it. You would be compelled in some way to add, this was really good, and not be able to keep quiet about it." (Informant 8)

Extra-role – salesperson: The advocates in this study believe they act as salespersons for the service provider. They urge listeners to actually use the provider's service. In addition, they follow up people's interests and actively prepare information (e.g., company materials and website links) to help others access the service provider. They may even contact the company on behalf of their friends or relatives, trying to encourage a deal. All these are customer extra-role behaviours extending beyond their own patronage and repeat purchase. Prior research on customer *extra-role behaviours* are mainly concerned with behaviours that assist the company in delivering the service well, such as maintaining a clean shopping environment (Bettencourt, 1997). Behaviours that assist other customers, such as helping others in finding products or how to use the service correctly, have not been researched in the context of customer-to-customer communications (Groth, 2005). Therefore, this research highlights another aspect of customer voluntary behaviours.

“The next day I would send them an email saying ‘remember how you said you would be potentially interested, if you ever follow up on it give this guy a call’. So I’d almost be like a salesperson for him (laughs).” (Informant 1)

“So I’ll ring up Guitar Factory and say this is what my friend has been offered, what can you do?” (Informant 5)

“I send them the link of the plan or I’d send them, if we had some information at home, because we keep, my husband and I keep quite detailed records of contracts and things, so I’d grab that and see what I could pass on to them....I should become a sales person for them. I recommend it so strongly I should get some money out of it.” (Informant 6)

The role of salesperson also manifests itself when advocates naturally downplay competitors in their conversations. This enhances the vividness of the message and potentially the effectiveness of the message influence. The objectivity of WOM has long been acknowledged (Gilly et al., 1998), which means that the communicator does not have vested interests in the organization discussed (Heath, Motta and Petre, 2006). While this sense of objectivity is still maintained, advocacy also embraces strong subjectivity when customers promote the service provider against the competition. There are always risks in being subjective and forceful in general WOM communications (Mazzarol, Sweeney and Soutar, 2007), but advocates appear to ignore these risks.

“Like I would say to people, ‘oh god, don’t go to Wal-Mart. Go to Target. Target’s clean’. Well, I thought Wal-Mart was cheaper? No, I think it’s a lie. I think that’s a total lie. I think that’s advertising.” (Informant 8)

“I’d also compare it to other services and the sort of typical personal trainer that is out there and make it very clear that this guy is almost a different league.” (Informant 1)

“Don’t ever go for BT. It doesn’t make any sense - I think that this is the best provider and I’ve used them and they are much cheaper and they can answer your calls at 11:30 at night if you need to.” (Informant 2)

Motivation - Believing and nurturing: Motivations for WOM are essentially self-related and other-related (Dichter, 1966; Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993; Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998). Self-related motives suggest that customers generate WOM as a result of recent ownership of a product or pleasurable experiences, or to enhance their personal image by being a smart shopper. Other-related motives refer to altruism, which is the concern for others. Similarly, the expression of joy and the concern for others are prevalent in advocacy. However, another unique dimension is consistent across the majority of informants – the belief and conviction about the advocated service provider. Based on a series of their own experiences, early positive impressions finally evolve into convictions, which propels customer advocacy. Unlike advocacy, it appears that WOM does *not* have to be based on real experiences (Dichter, 1966), and may not include the strong belief and convictions.

“Yes, [my motivation is] definitely a strong belief from experience. You see and you compare. You just know. Yeah, the own belief. It’s in you.” (Informant 9)

“Features of the strong recommendation? Conviction, yes. And I think also the assumption that it’s some use for the person I’m addressing.” (Informant 10)

“For someone to strongly recommend, they need to believe in it. They need to understand what’s involved. They need to have experienced it. I’ve tried it and it’s taken a while for me to get to the point ... That’s how strong I feel about it.” (Informant 6)

Some interviewees also mention another motive – to support and nurture the service provider. This is related to the altruism motive (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Explained by social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) or equity theory (Adams, 1963), this motive has only been found relevant in limited WOM research (e.g., Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998). For advocates, they are willing to support the provider that offers the best service in the industry. One informant believes that these providers need to be nurtured with advocacy, otherwise they might not be sustainable in the future.

“I’m just trying to be an advocate for a really good thing. How could you not be in this day and age? There’s some cynical part of you that thinks it might disappear, it might not last or if we don’t nurture it, it might not be there always. It’s almost fear.” (Informant 8)

Contribution, Future Research and Managerial Implications

This research highlights advocacy as a distinct context for new research and theory development. All interviewees reveal that they have engaged in numerous positive WOM interactions with others, however, they have only acted as advocates for a very limited number of service providers. The distinction between advocacy and positive WOM is further supported by our findings such as the highly explicit, descriptive and emotive language, as well as the proactive-ness, the salesperson role and the conviction associated with advocacy. These findings provide additional insights that existing positive WOM measures and research do not address. Further, much WOM theory has been studied through the lens of relationship marketing (e.g., Brown *et al.*, 2005; Gremler and Brown, 1999), without clarifying the association between different types of positive WOM and their relationship emphasis. The current research may provide a foundation for further exploration of forms of WOM in relationship marketing.

This initial pilot study represents the first phase of a research project. Future research should extend the sample size and quantify the measure of customer advocacy. A quantitative study could explore the antecedents and the impact of advocacy and advance understanding of this important phenomenon. This future work may also examine the difference between advocacy for an individual employee and advocacy more generally for an organization. Advocacy on brand experiences can be another potential research area.

There are important managerial implication of recognizing the distinction between advocacy and positive WOM and identifying underlying causes. For service managers, advocacy is more desirable than positive WOM, given the higher emphasis on conviction, vividness and helpfulness during (or even after) its communication. Understanding this high level of extra-role customer behaviour should provide opportunities for firms to create more meaningful service experience. As advocacy typically results in extremely positive and active recommendation, it can serve as an important check of perceived performance. More detailed understanding of the characteristics of advocacy will assist service organizations as they strive to achieve greater success and excellence in their sector.

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