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# **Why Do Consumers Use the Internet for Complaining to the Company?**

## **Determinants Explaining the Propensity to Complain Online**

**Key Findings of the PhD thesis  
(Management Summary)**

**Alexandra Daniela Zaugg  
Universität Bern  
Institut für Wirtschaftsinformatik  
Abteilung Informationsmanagement**

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## 1 Online Complaining – Limited Knowledge, Profitable Opportunities

Nowadays most companies operate multiple channels including Internet. For companies, receiving a complaint by Internet is particularly attractive as online complaint management increases both the efficiency and effectivity of complaint management.<sup>1</sup> Though many large companies in Switzerland offer a possibility to complain online, an exploratory case study with a major Swiss telecommunications company indicates that most businesses have not considered the customers' perspective on online complaining.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, complaint channel choice and online consumer complaining behaviour have received only limited attention from both scholars. The promoters and inhibitors why consumers complain online have had to be found out yet. Thus, this research project aims at comprehensively explaining a customer's propensity to complain online from various perspectives.

## 2 Methodology

Based on an extensive literature review, a conceptual framework explaining a customer's propensity to complain online has been developed.<sup>3</sup> In order to examine the determinants of this construct, three qualitative studies in the Swiss telecommunications market were conducted.

In the expert interviews, the perspective of customer care managers of the four most important Swiss telecommunications companies (Cablecom, Orange, Sunrise, and Swisscom) and three scholars in the field of complaining behaviour has been examined. As a second data source, 126 complaints by letter and 135 online complaints provided by two of the companies have been analysed. Moreover, a company provided a complaint statistics encompassing 5'616 complaints. Finally, seven interviews with online complainants have contributed insights into the customer perspective.

As a result, the conceptual framework explaining the propensity to complain online has been refined. Here, the providers' responsiveness has turned out to be a key determinant.

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<sup>1</sup> See Scholl (2008), pp. 35.

<sup>2</sup> See Zaugg (2008a), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> The conceptual framework can be found in Zaugg (2008b). Further information about e-channel choice determinants and the nature of communication channels is discussed in Zaugg (2007).

### 3 Low Diffusion of Online Complaining Services – Vicious Circle

According to the customer care managers, the diffusion of online complaint management is under average, as expert C points out. „*Obwohl ich denke, es hat sich meiner Meinung nach nicht so rasch etabliert, wie ich mir das vor vier, fünf Jahren vorgestellt hatte. Also vor allem jetzt bei uns: Es hat sich zwar vervierfacht, die Menge von Online-Beschwerden, aber auch von Anfragen. Aber wenn man so vergleicht, wie Internet im Haushalt zugenommen hat, haben sich die Anfragen nicht proportional entwickelt. Ich habe das Gefühl, die Leute kommen erst langsam auf das.*“<sup>4</sup> Though the number of online complaints is fourfold today, it is still not proportional to the growth of private Internet usage. Yet, if the current quality level of online complaining services is considered, then it is no surprise that complainants are reluctant to use it.

One of the key factors is the providers' responsiveness, and related to this construct, the probability of success. But due the negative experiences online complainants have made in the last few years, only a minority of dissatisfied customers complain online today. This is a vicious circle: As long as the share of online complainants is low, customer care managers think it is not justified to invest in online complaint management. „*Da behaupte ich, haben wir doch noch recht viel Potential. Das ist so. Aber das Problem ist genau, warum investiert man nicht mehr in solche Projekte? Weil einfach weniger als 10% der Kunden dieses Medium nützen über diesen Kanal. Oftmals hat man dann keinen Anreiz, das effektiv auszubauen.*“<sup>5</sup> Consequently, it is not possible to reply to online complaints as quick as customers expect. This in turn, reduces the perceived probability of success and makes customers choose another channel. The lower the number of online complainants is, however, the less attractive is an online complaint management solution for companies in terms of profitability. Hence, companies offering online complaining services should ensure that a sufficient number of customers complains online.

### 4 Measures for Increasing the Propensity to Complain Online

Based on the empirical findings, specific recommendations for increasing the number of online complainants can be derived.

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<sup>4</sup> Expert C, paragraph 4.

<sup>5</sup> Expert A, paragraph 146.

#### 4.1 Improve the Providers' Responsiveness

The interviewed scholars and customers alike expect an answer within 24 hours. Replying to customer 7 took about three days, which exceeds by far the response time she finds acceptable. *„Ich erwarte auf eine Beschwerde eigentlich innerhalb von 24 Stunden eine Antwort und eine Lösung des Problems. Also drei Tage sind zu lang.“*<sup>6</sup> In her opinion, three days are too long. While she understands that it may not be possible to solve a complaint within one day, she expects at least personalised information about the status of her complaint within this time. *„Wenn ich eine E-Mail schreibe, dann erwarte ich eigentlich, dass ich innerhalb von 24 Stunden eine Antwort habe. Zumindest... die Beschwerde ist eingegangen und dann prüfen sie. Dann wenn sie vielleicht nicht sofort das Problem lösen können.... Das kommt vielleicht auf die Thematik darauf an.... Das verstehe ich sehr gut.“*<sup>7</sup> Also, customer 1 understands that a company cannot solve complex issues at once. He, however, expect an easy problem to be solved in up to four hours. For more complex problems, two days are appropriate for him. *„Also bis zur mittleren Größenordnung, bis zu drei bis vier Stunden. Bei komplizierteren Problemen, können sie dann ja sagen: "Das Problem ist kompliziert. Da gibt es erst eine Lösung innerhalb von zwei Tagen." Das ist okay.“*<sup>8</sup>

While most customers (and scholars) expect an answer within 24 hours, customer care managers are convinced that two to three days is an appropriate response time for straightforward problems. This disconfirmation of customer expectations leads to a low perceived probability of success for online complaints, which in turn reduces the likelihood that computer-mediated communication will be chosen for complaining in future. This opinion is shared by expert A. *„Ich bin fast überzeugt, es würden vielleicht mehr Leute das Webformular nützen, wenn sie wüssten, dass es a) sicher beantwortet wird und b) denselben Effekt hat, als wenn sie einen Brief schreiben würden.“*<sup>9</sup> So the customer care experts would already know the key to increasing the number of online complainants. Both expert A and expert B agree that customers expect a fast reply by email. And they also confirm that customers who do not receive a fast answer are disappointed and are likely not to complain online for some years again. Still, online feedbacks are still treated like letters by telecommunications companies. Moreover, expert C points out that online complainants who get an answer within 48 are more satisfied than other online complainants. And that they tell their friends and relatives how

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<sup>6</sup> Customer 7, paragraph 27-31.

<sup>7</sup> Customer 7, paragraph 35.

<sup>8</sup> Customer 1, paragraph 126.

<sup>9</sup> Expert A, paragraph 123.

satisfied they are by complaining online. „Kunden, welche auf ihre Anfragen innert 48 Stunden eine Antwort erhielten, sind in den grundlegenden Punkten einfach zufriedener. Und jene erzählen das auch weiter. Das würde ich auch so machen: "Hey du schreibst ihnen eine E-Mail und nach ein oder zwei Tagen erhältst du deine Antwort". Wenn es jetzt anders wäre und man eine Woche benötigte, um eine Antwort zu erhalten, wäre es wohl gerade umgekehrt: "Ah die an der E-Mail..., da wartest du eine Woche lang, bis du wieder etwas hörst.“ Als ich denke schon, dass das einen ganz grossen Einfluss hat.“<sup>10</sup> Positive word-of-mouth increases the possibility that others will test e-services, too. Whereas complainants who have to wait for a week or longer spread negative word-of-mouth and do not recommend using online complaining services.

The findings of the studies have clearly revealed a mismatch between the assessment of the customer care managers and customer expectations. Although customer expectations are rather high, they are not unjustified. It lies in the nature of computer-mediated communication that the communication velocity is high. In their private lives, customers are used to this immediateness. In order to avoid dissatisfaction, it is time for companies to reconsider their online complaint management concept. Improving the reaction time to less than 24 hours may be unrealistic in the near future. In the long run, companies probably have only two alternatives: Either they are able to react within 24 hours to the online feedback or they do not offer online complaint management at all. Otherwise, they risk annoying their – already dissatisfied – customers unnecessarily.

## 4.2 Design of the Online Complaint Management Solution

The easier it is to find the contact form, the more complainants will use it. Expert A explains that customers who do not find online contact details on their invoice will just choose letter or phone as these details are readily available. „Was man aber klar sehen muss: Finden es die Leute überhaupt auf der Webseite? Die schauen vielleicht auf ihre Rechnung, sehen keine Emailadresse – ja, dann schreiben sie halt. Oder sie rufen an. Das Kontaktformular auf der Webseite – a) muss man es zuerst finden - ist unterdessen schon bedeutend besser positioniert als früher oder auf anderen Webseiten.“<sup>11</sup> Besides the positioning of the online contact possibility, it is also important to name it explicitly and to consider whether an email address or a web form should be provided.

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<sup>10</sup> Expert C, paragraph 154.

<sup>11</sup> Expert A, paragraph 44.

#### 4.2.1 Name It Explicitly

Explicitly naming the email address or the categories of the contact form is crucial, too. If the filtering mechanism does not have an option „criticism / complaints” or similar, it is challenging for customers to recognise that this form can indeed be used for complaints, explains Gillian Naylor. *„It is hard to find how to complain online. I have gone to websites and they have "contact us". And you go through and some of them have scroll-down-menus. And if you want to complain a lot, most of time, it does not allow for that. It is like, "Do you have a question about your coverage?", or this or that. I do not think companies make it easy to complain online.”*<sup>12</sup> As a result, many online complainants are not sure whether they have chosen the correct way to lodge their complaints, they feel uncertain, e.g. whether or not the complaint will be directed to the right person.

The first action of customer 2 was to go online and search an appropriate online contact possibility he could use for his online complaint. But the information on the website was so general that he did not know how he could send his online complaint. *„Oder, man sucht zuerst auf dem Internet nach einer Möglichkeit, das schriftlich zu geben, damit man eine Antwort bekommt. Da das so allgemein ist, man nicht weiss, wohin das geht oder wohin man das Problem adressieren kann, greift man zum Telefon.”*<sup>13</sup> Customer 1 has encountered the same problem, he has not found a dedicated online complaint channel. *„Den Beschwerdekanal habe ich noch gar nicht gefunden. Also ich würde gerne zum Customer-Support oder zum Customer-Relation gehen.”*<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he used an email address he had from a previous contact. But actually, he would have wanted to contact the customer service directly. To the question why he did not use the contact form, he answered that he was not sure whether that would work or not. *„Ob das geht, weiss ich nicht, oder.”*<sup>15</sup> Also, customer 7 doubts whether the general contact form is supposed to be used for online complaints. Accordingly, it took her longer to find it. *„Aber man findet es nicht so gut, weil es einfach ein allgemeines Kontaktformular ist. Man weiss nicht, muss ich wirklich das brauchen für eine Beschwerde oder nicht? Also ich weiss nicht, ob das jetzt wirklich der richtige Kanal gewesen ist oder nicht.”*<sup>16</sup> And she still does not know whether this was the „right“ channel or not, even though her complaint has been answered by company C. The uncertainty decreases the per-

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<sup>12</sup> Gillian Naylor, paragraph 9.

<sup>13</sup> Customer 2, paragraph 84.

<sup>14</sup> Customer 1, paragraph 75.

<sup>15</sup> Customer 1, paragraph 92.

<sup>16</sup> Customer 7, paragraph 76.

ceived probability of success of computer-mediated communication. This can be changed by providing an explicit category „criticism / feedback” or „complaint”. Then, customers know that they can use the web form to complain.

Moreover, by using explicit labels, the company indicates that online complaints are taken seriously, as expert A points out. *„Und alleine schon der Button "Kritik / Anregungen" braucht ja auch eine gewisse Bereitschaft, sich dieser Kritik anzunehmen.”*<sup>17</sup> On the website of the telecommunications providers, complainants all have to click first on contact. With the two companies that offer explicitly the option „criticism / suggestions” (Swisscom) or „claim, suggestion, remark” (in the category „others”; Orange), it takes only two clicks to get to the contact form. The web forms of Cablecom and Sunrise require four resp. six clicks and there is only an option „feedback”.

#### 4.2.2 Email or Web Form?

Because of privacy concerns, customer 6 prefers writing an email instead of filling out a web form. She objects revealing information which she thinks is not necessary to handle her case. *„Was vielleicht auch noch interessant ist, ich habe es viel lieber, wenn ich ein E-Mail habe und nicht so ein Kontaktformular. [...] Wo ich zum Teil Angaben machen muss, wo ich gar nicht will. Also verschiedene Telefonnummern, usw. Also das mit dem Sternchen, dass man eben gar nicht weiter kommt. Ich habe es lieber dort, wo ich wirklich auf einen Kontakt klicken kann und ein E-Mail erhalte.”*<sup>18</sup> There are mandatory fields she considers unnecessary, e.g. different phone numbers because she prefers to get an email reply to an email request.

If she can decide which fields she wants to fill out, then she does not mind using a contact form. *„Also eben, wenn ich selber entscheiden kann, welche Angaben ich mache, dann gar nicht. Manchmal habe ich wirklich so ein wenig... so Telefon, das gebe ich nicht gerne an, weil ich finde, ich schreibe ein Mail, also will ich eine Mail-Antwort. Oder was ich auch zum Beispiel... immer dieses Geburtsdatum, ich habe überhaupt nichts zu tun mit meinem Alter oder mit meinem Geburtstag. Aber ich finde, ich kriege ja von denen nicht ein Geschenk oder eine Karte, also weshalb müssen die mein Geburtsdatum wissen?”*<sup>19</sup> For instance, she does not understand why she has to give her birth date. After all, the company will not send her a birthday present. While she has no problem giving this information for buying a mobile

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<sup>17</sup> Expert A, paragraph 44.

<sup>18</sup> Customer 6, paragraph 47.

<sup>19</sup> Customer 6, paragraph 114.

phone subscription, she does object providing it for ordering from a catalogue company. *„Aber dann begreife ich es und dass man es angeben muss, wenn man ein Abo abschliesst. Weil das ist ja manchmal noch rechtlich; dort kein Problem. Aber ich verstehe nicht, wenn ich irgend in einem Katalog etwas bestellen will oder irgendwo... Was soll das? Oder Zivilstand, also...”*<sup>20</sup> And why she should declare her marital status is not obvious for her either.

Companies should pay attention to request only information as compulsory which is really necessary in order to process the feedback. Other information, e.g. for marketing intelligence, should be asked for with non-mandatory fields. Yet, customers understand that a company needs specific information in order to handle the feedback. They do not generally object revealing information.

Interviewee 4 appreciates web forms because in his opinion, it is much easier to fill out a web form than writing a free text email. The structure supports him in providing all necessary information. *„Weil, hmmm, man wird geführt, es ist eine Struktur drin, es kann sicher eine gute Lösung sein, wo man einfach geführt im Internet etwas eingeben kann und die Firma stellt sicher, dass man alle Angaben gibt, die sie wollen und brauchen.”*<sup>21</sup> Completing the form requires less cognitive effort because of the provided guidance.

Based on the available data, it is not possible to decide whether complainants prefer a web form or an email contact. If web forms are convenient to use, i.e. if they do not require too many clicks to complete the process, and if the number of mandatory fields is restricted to the information a company needs for handling the complaint, then customers have probably no objection against using the web form. Regardless of the implemented solution, the key criterion is ease of use.

### 4.2.3 FAQs

Another issue that was criticised is the FAQ webpage. Before the online feedback can be sent, some companies route their customers to the FAQ webpage, hoping that customers find the answer themselves and do not contact the company. Expert A points out that he sees quite some potential in FAQs, which still waits to be exploited. Customers can be guided through the problem analysis and by means of the FAQs solve the problem themselves. If the issue requires interaction, then customers can still be asked to call the hotline. *„Das heisst, man kann den Kunden, vielleicht sogar besser als heute, ganz klar durch seine Schritte*

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<sup>20</sup> Customer 6, paragraph 116.

<sup>21</sup> Customer 4, paragraph 213.

durchführen, indem man z.B. bei einer Beschwerde auch sagt: "Du hast eine Beschwerde zum Thema X. Anhand von deinem Text können wir herauslesen, dass du mit Y ein Problem hast. Hast du bereits unser FAQ bezüglich Y gelesen?" oder "Wir wissen, dass wir im Moment in diesem und jenem Bereich ein Problem haben. Dieses kannst du so oder so lösen oder ruf auf die Hotline an, dann können wir dir direkt helfen". Ich bin überzeugt, so würde man dem Kunden und uns Zeit und Ärger ersparen, indem man solche Sachen viel mehr nützen würde. Da behaupte ich, haben wir doch noch recht viel Potential.<sup>22</sup> This may be very useful in the case of a technical problem and as expert A suggests, helps both customers and company to save time.

In the case of complaining, however, complainants perceive the detour through the FAQs to be very annoying. Once they have decided to complain, they want to send their feedback immediately, in particular if they are emotionally upset as expert B points out. „Jemand, der sehr emotional ist, den nervt es stark, wenn er jetzt noch so viel ausfüllen muss.“<sup>23</sup> As a result, companies should carefully consider whether they generally send everyone who wants to contact the company online through the FAQ page or whether they want to filter the users. For a complaint or a general enquiry, the FAQ page can be a source of dissatisfaction.

Moreover, one interviewee criticises that the support by the FAQs is very limited because the explanations are too short and not comprehensible for a layperson. „Wenn die Hilfestellungen im Internet selber besser wären, also beim FAQ weitere Erklärungen, und „haben Sie das verstanden?“, Beispiele, die leicht zu verfolgen sind und Bildschirmsnapshots, das muss so und so, und das und das, und dann müsste, erst wenn das nicht mehr geht, dann geht es weiter. Nicht nur, dass Sie 10 Fragen mit wenig Support haben, oder.“<sup>24</sup> He would appreciate extensive, systematic explanations, examples, and print screens. So, if companies are interested in self-service by FAQs and force customers to visit this page, they should invest more in providing easily understandable information.

### 4.3 Send a Confirmation

By sending a confirmation, the performance risk is reduced considerably. Complainants are certain that their message has successfully been transmitted. The company could even announce how long it will approximately take to process the feedback. Expert A agrees that a

<sup>22</sup> Expert A, paragraph 147.

<sup>23</sup> Expert B, paragraph 98.

<sup>24</sup> Customer 1, paragraph 248.

confirmation gives the complainants certainty regarding transmission and processing. *„Aber er weiss zumindest "Ich habe das jetzt abgesetzt, das müsste jetzt irgendwohin kommen." Aber, ja... Je nach Tool hat man vielleicht sogar noch eine Emailbestätigung mit dem Text drin: „Du hast da ein Feedback abgesetzt, das ist Deine Feedbacknummer, Du bekommst dann Bescheid.“ Das ist bei uns nicht so. Aber wir geben ihm eine Quittung ab, dass wir es bekommen haben und an die richtige Stelle leiten werden.“*<sup>25</sup> Even better would be a ticket number which allows complainants to refer to this number in future interactions, so they can avoid telling the entire story again. This, however, is not (yet) offered by company A.

If companies decide to send a confirmation, they should absolutely comply with the information they give. Under no circumstances should they ignore the email. *„And I've done that with all that companies that sent me this automated reply. And that's it. It is the last I have ever heard from them. And got very upset about that. As a matter of fact, that is grounds for another complaint. Not only did I complain and you did acknowledge that you received my complaint, but you did not handle the complaint. So, if I am really looking for a fight, that might be the way to do it.“*<sup>26</sup> What Moshe Davidow has experienced is a safe way to annoy customers. If one is advised that an answer can be expected in x days and nothing happens, then this expectation is disconfirmed, which leads to an even higher level of dissatisfaction.

#### 4.4 Personalisation of Online Complaining Services

A confirmation of receiving the complaint can be understood as a commitment of the company. The binding character can additionally be increased by presenting the customer care team or at least the customer care manager in charge on the website. As the complaint analysis has shown, many complainants do not know to whom to address the complaint. Some openings reveal clearly the unease that the complaint cannot be sent to a person in flesh and blood, e.g. one complainant addressed the complaint to Mr. or Ms. Customer Care.

Moreover, most interviewed online complainants think that it takes longer to get a reply because an online complaint does not go directly to a specific person, but to a general pool, as e.g. customer 7 points out. *„Aber das da geht, habe ich den Eindruck, einfach so an eine Infodresse, also einfach so eine Art Allgmeinpool. Und deshalb geht es wohl auch etwa drei Tage, bis man eine Antwort hat.“*<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Expert A, paragraph 105.

<sup>26</sup> Moshe Davidow, paragraph 109.

<sup>27</sup> Customer 7, paragraph 72.

Textbased communication seems to be depersonalised enough as it is, so a person the complaint can be sent to would be desirable from a complainant's perspective. The character of the complaint becomes more binding, though it will not be this very person who processes the complaint. But if customers are informed that they can send their complaint to person X and that then someone of the team will handle the complaint, they probably do not mind.

#### 4.5 Channel Promotion

Finally, communication about complaint channels helps increasing the number of online complainants. Nowadays, a free product hotline number can be found on many consumer products, as Moshe Davidow points out. „*You look at most of the products today, and you see the 1800-numbers. But they do not have their email address. Now why is that?*”<sup>28</sup> Whereas there is often no URL or email address published. This holds also true for the telecommunications companies. Except Swisscom, all companies only refer to the free hotline number.

### 5 Promoting Online Complaining - In a Nutshell...

As outlined above, there are a number of simple, often inexpensive measures a company can take to increase the number of online complaints. In a nutshell, online complaint management can be promoted by

- replying reliably to the complaint within the promised time frame.
- an easily accessible feedback form or email address (straightforward click path).
- avoiding too many steps in the web form, e.g. no FAQs for a complaint.
- explicit naming of the feedback category, e.g. complaint / criticism.
- not using mandatory fields for information that is not required for processing the feedback.
- sending a confirmation that feedback has been transmitted.
- announcing how long it will presumably take to process the feedback.
- including a ticket number which allows to track and trace the complaint.
- communicating online contact possibilities.
- “personalising” the online complaining experience by presenting the customer care team and / or the customer care manager on the website.

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<sup>28</sup> Moshe Davidow, paragraph 121.

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## About the Author

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Since her graduation in business administration (major) and Latin (minor), Alexandra Daniela Zaugg has been working as research and teaching assistant at the Institute of Information System Science of the University of Bern. A focus of her research is the online complaining behaviour of consumers as well as the use of online complaint management in companies. For her PhD thesis, she has developed and tested a conceptual framework explaining a consumer's propensity to complain online. I.e. the promoters and inhibitors for an online complaint have been identified. A decisive factor is the nature of complaint channels, in particular the characteristics of Internet in comparison to other channels. This is another key subject of her research.

## Contact

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Alexandra Daniela Zaugg  
Institut für Wirtschaftsinformatik, Universität Bern  
Engenhaldenstrasse 8  
CH-3012 Bern  
++41 (0)31 631 49 82 / 47 85  
[alexandra.zaugg@iwi.unibe.ch](mailto:alexandra.zaugg@iwi.unibe.ch)

Information about online complaining: <http://www.onlinebeschwerden.ch>

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