

## **Customer satisfaction - from the viewpoint of the consumers**

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## **1. The importance of customer satisfaction in the interaction of the market participants**

All activities of an enterprise are aimed in the result at the customer and should move therefore at any time and everywhere to the customers into the centre of the consideration. Both the short-term economical success and the strategic faith in the future of an enterprise are based accordingly in particular on a high measure of customer loyalty. Since customer loyalty in the first place arises through customer satisfaction, it is from the position of the offering economy logical that the subject customer satisfaction in science and practice attained central importance. Enterprises spend considerable resources in order to measure the satisfaction of their customers and to increase the satisfaction of their customers if possible.

By contrast consumers do not have any interest with their purchase decisions in customer loyalty basically. For them it is a question only of optimizing their individual benefit. The interpretation of that, what the individual regards as "beneficial" in this sense and in this way also the motives for the consumption can be in this case arranged very differently. From strictly rational to highly irrational consumption decisions many variants are conceivable and to observe in the practice. Customer loyalty as it is striven for by the enterprises the consumption decision can help possibly, it does not play, however, any central role. In spite of occasional counterexamples a consumer wants to make his purchase decision in the actual case normally alone under weighing of the currently present parameters and considering his individual motives without any influence from external factors as customer loyalty. His satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or a service does not stand usually in any context to any relationship to the offering enterprise, but concentrates only onto the offer asked about.

For consumers a relationship to an enterprise can be, however, also useful. For example the construction of a confidence relationship to a car repair shop can lie also in the interest of the consumer. Same one is valid if the information and decision process can be shortened by a positive relationship to a supplier before a purchase considerably, and in spite of that an optimal solution for the consumer is reached. At stable two-way confidence between suppliers and consumers such constellations that can be useful for both sides are possible, however, this will rather remain the exception in a dynamic market process due to the increasing anonymity in our consumer society as the rule.

Problematic forms of customer loyalty are to be observed sometimes if critical consumer behaviour is interrupted by external influences for example if a purchase decision is overlapped by marked brand loyalty in an actually functioning competition market.

Consumer organizations define themselves as interest representatives of the consumers and have therefore their satisfaction unavoidably in their information and consultation work in mind, however, it is a question in this case of the satisfaction with market conditions and/or specific offers, however normally not of satisfaction with enterprises. Customer loyalty can be

almost counterproductive in this context for a neutral, proper information work and is not therefore a topic for the interest representatives of the consumers. Same one is valid for enterprise-related customer satisfaction as it is considered by the providers in context with the topic customer loyalty.

Therefore one finds hardly a reference to the initial provider-independent consumer interest, however, an abundance of theoretical considerations for the importance of customer satisfaction in its relationship to the objective of a high customer loyalty in the literature on the topic customer satisfaction<sup>1</sup> up to practical instructions for enterprises for the realization of own satisfaction investigations<sup>2</sup>. This all does not concern, however, to the initial interest of the consumers for good products or services, therefore to what might activate customer satisfaction from consumer's point of view.

Obviously on the one hand suppliers and on the other hand consumers consider customer satisfaction from completely different perspectives. Both can hardly be brought into agreement because of the different approaches. For the supplier side with the aspects customer satisfaction and customer loyalty only the reference to the enterprise is of interest while consumers normally are not wanting to develop any relationship to the supplier, but they are concentrating on the selection of the offer that is optimal for them exclusively. The completely different perspective becomes last but not least clear through supplier independence being basic assumption for the information work of the consumer organizations. The concept customer satisfaction is used therefore as exclusively an element of the marketing by enterprises in the discussion.

In spite of that it should be checked whether the interest of the consumers could be considered in spite of the different interest situations in the concepts for the measurement of customer satisfaction more strongly. In which areas this would be conceivable? Which approaches would be possible?

## **2. Methodical basics for the customer satisfaction measurement**

### **2.1. Definition of the concept customer satisfaction**

For the question of the definition of customer satisfaction in the scientific discussion<sup>3</sup> the "paradigm of disconfirmation" has achieved acceptance to a large extent. After that a customer compares his current experiences during the product or service use (actual performance) with his corresponding expectations (target performance). If the actual performance corresponds to the target performance, the expectations are confirmed and we have confirmation. In this case there is satisfaction. If the expected performance of the actual

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<sup>1</sup> cf. e.g. Töpfer, A. (Ed.): Handbuch Kundenmanagement, Anforderungen, Prozesse, Zufriedenheit, Bindung und Wert von Kunden, 3rd ed., Berlin/Heidelberg 2008

<sup>2</sup> cf. Harmeier, J.: Kundenzufriedenheitsindex – Wie gehen Sie Schritt für Schritt vor?, Messung von Kundenzufriedenheit, in [www.qm-web.de](http://www.qm-web.de), 2008

<sup>3</sup> cf. Homburg, C. & Stock-Homburg, R.: Theoretische Perspektiven zur Kundenzufriedenheit, in Homburg, C. (Ed.): Kundenzufriedenheit, 7th. ed., Wiesbaden 2008, p. 17ff.

performance is surpassed, it comes to positive disconfirmation and especially high satisfaction (enthusiasm). If on the other hand the expectation is not achieved by the actual performance, it leads due to negative disconfirmation to dissatisfaction.

Customer satisfaction is defined therefore as the degree of the correspondence between the expectation which a customer has onto a product or a service, and the achievement in fact perceived by him. The real quality opinion is compared with the quality expectation with respect to the consumed product or the consumed service.

## **2.2. Methodical approaches for the measurement of customer satisfaction**

Customer satisfaction can be measured in highly different way. Fundamentally there is a differentiation between objective and subjective procedures.<sup>4</sup>

Objective methods of measurement are based on objectively provable, clearly measurable criteria, as e.g. turnover, profit, share of the market, share of repurchases, movement of customers and so forth. These criteria are not falsified by possibly distorted perceptions, however, the informative capability of such economic sizes is with respect to a possible customer satisfaction restricted since these numbers can be influenced considerably by very different external factors as for example by the competition situation in diverse specifications.

Subjective procedures are based on the perception of the customer and are preferred therefore in spite of the insecurity combined with that in the enterprise practice since these methods of measurement correspond to the represented satisfaction concept with the comparison, necessary for that, between "real perception" and "expected performance" most suitable. In the case of the subjective procedures in turn two types are distinguished, the feature-oriented procedures that then still keep on being differentiated as well as the event-oriented procedures that consider the satisfaction with a specific contact occurrence. Sometimes another third procedure variant is distinguished<sup>5</sup>, namely the problem-oriented procedure which for example can consist in the evaluation of complaints. However, it seems doubtful whether the complaint behaviour of customers can be regarded as a reliable satisfaction indicator since only a part of the possibly available dissatisfaction in complaints expresses itself.

From special interest the feature-related approaches, that one subdivides into implicit and explicit procedures, are therefore. The commitment of test buyers (Mystery Shopping) belongs for example to the implicit variants. Among the explicit methods the satisfaction is measured with uni- or multidimensional satisfaction scales, while the unidimensional procedures which use only an only indicator (total satisfaction) are less significant than the

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Töpfer, A.: Konzeptionelle Grundlagen und Messkonzepte für den Kundenzufriedenheitsindex (KZI/CSI) und den Kundenbindungsindex (KBI/CFI), in Töpfer, A. (Ed.): Handbuch Kundenmanagement, I.c., S. 311ff.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Nerdinger, F. W. & Neumann, C.: Kundenzufriedenheit und Kundenbindung, in Moser, K. (Ed.): Wirtschaftspsychologie, Berlin/Heidelberg 2007, p. 136

multidimensional procedures which collect individual opinions for a longer list of individual items.

This last-named variant is usually used today in customer satisfaction analyses particularly if it is a question of considering the whole complexity of an enterprise performance. The total performance is analyzed in single items in order to be able to consult the customer to the "sub-satisfactions" in each item. In parallel the customer is consulted also for his assessment of the respective importance of this single item for its degree for total satisfaction. Thus one receives also findings for the subjective weighting of the single subsets of the system.

### **2.3. Measurement of customer satisfaction in the practice**

Customer satisfaction surveys can be designed as a singular project within a single enterprise, they can consider also the essential competitors or all competitors of a branch. Further branch-comprehensive investigations up to the so called national customer monitors which attention is paid to later still are conceivable. The fundamental procedure is in these cases to a large extent identical and can be subdivided in eight phases<sup>6</sup> :

- (1) First of all the survey object and the survey objective are to be defined including the scope of the target group for the planned questioning.
- (2) The explorative phase follows in which in specific customer conversations the requirements and expectations of the customers onto the product or the service are determined.
- (3) Then the methodical frame is defined when the kind of the investigation, the methodology of the survey as well as contents and form of the questions are decided on.
- (4) As a fourth phase a pretest with a small number of customers follows, that where appropriate can lead to a change of the method (back to phase 3) and a repeated pretest.
- (5) In the next phase the actual realization of the investigation follows.
- (6) Then the analysis of the survey data follows. According to data situation and differentiation degree of the single data also bivariate and/or multivariate analysis procedures are conceivable next to procedures descriptive in that.
- (7) The plans derived from that for the increase of the satisfaction are the actual result of the satisfaction investigation.
- (8) Finally concrete transfer strategies become in the last phase from these plans.

The procedure shows clearly that the attention is alone on the position of the enterprise. Information on the satisfaction of the customer are determined indeed, however only on the basis of the contact to the own enterprise.

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Raab, G. & Werner, N.: Customer Relationship Management, 3rd. ed., Frankfurt/Main 2009, p. 102ff.

The intention in the case of the more comprehensive customer satisfaction investigations within the framework of national customer barometers is not different, as we can read from the list of the examined single topics easily<sup>7</sup> :

- Contact questions to target branch and supplier
- Expectations onto the performances (\*)
- Fulfillment of these expectations (\*)
- Distance of the to the ideal (\*)
- Quality and satisfaction with the services of the branch and the supplier
- Decisive reason for the satisfaction opinion
- Satisfaction with single branch-relevant performance factors
- After sales experiences
- Perceived value (price to given quality, quality to given price)
- Repurchase- and cross buying intention (-)
- Change barriers and price tolerance (-)
- Intensity and duration of the customer relationship (-)
- Recommendation purpose and goodwill (-)
- Complaint behaviour and satisfaction

Obviously this topic catalogue results from the interest perspective of the suppliers. Only the ones with topics characterized (\*) concentrate on the actual offer and take up in this way the perspectives of the consumer simultaneously. Already the aspects which are aimed at the branch leave the level of the concrete offer.

The emphasis of the topic catalogue lies on aspects, rather uninteresting for consumers, which refer to the positioning of the enterprise or the branch or also to predicted future consumer behaviour.

The with (-) to characterized topics definitely suit outside of the consumer interest and are useful thus only for the information interest of the suppliers. Obviously it is a question here more of a strength-weakness-analysis of the enterprise performance, to which only as one from several aspects also the offer quality belongs. The perception of the enterprise or a whole branch in public is more important seemingly in this topic catalogue.

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<sup>7</sup> cf. Bruhn, M.: Messung von Kundenzufriedenheit im Rahmen Nationaler Kundenbarometer – Konzeption und Nutzungspotenziale unterschiedlicher Customer Satisfaction Indizes, in: Töpfer, A. (Ed.): Handbuch Kundenmanagement, Berlin/Heidelberg 2008, p. 442f.

### **3. National customer barometers**

#### **3.1. The benefits of national customer barometers for different target groups**

For the increase of the acceptance of the national customer barometers it is pointed out that they are addressed to many target groups<sup>8</sup> .:

Customer barometers are supposed to be able to provide information to the consumers for consumption decisions, and indeed as confirmation according to previous purchase decisions and in the same way as assistance for potential customers, both for first purchases and for repeat purchase decisions. The existence of customer barometers is supposed to be ultimately an incentive to quality improvement and stronger customer orientation on the part of the providers which in the result the consumers profit by.

The benefit is considerably more recognizable, however, for the enterprises, in particular, when next to data for the own enterprise and for the total branch also the corresponding results are available for concurrent enterprises. The enterprises receive for example data for the effect of alternative competition strategies and information on the efficient resource use in the marketing. In branch surveys comparisons can be done in the customer orientation of different branches. The barometer data supply important basics for the own quality management. Positive rankings can be used in the own advertising. Inside the strengths and weaknesses of the enterprise and the branch are analyzed with all results.

With the inclusion of public services into national customer barometers also the corresponding public authorities receive positive and/or negative feedback on the customer acceptance and where appropriate references to necessary improvements. For the political and social decision makers the customer barometers supply a qualitative supplement of the quantitatively orientated macroeconomic accounting as well as indicators for the positioning of individual branches also in the international comparison.

The comparison of the benefit potentials for different target groups shows clearly that the interest of the consumers is only of subordinate importance even if the customer plays an important role of course as an addressee of the enterprise performance and profits also by positive market trends that are activated by satisfaction analyses possibly.

#### **3.2. Critical examination of individual examples of national customer barometers**

National customer barometer investigations are carried out since about 20 years in many countries regularly<sup>9</sup>. The development began in 1989 with the Swedish customer barometer ("Sveriges Kundbarometer"). Similar regular studies followed in the USA ("American Customer Satisfaction Index") and Germany ("deutsches Kundenbarometer", later

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Bruhn, M.: Messung von Kundenzufriedenheit im Rahmen Nationaler Kundenbarometer, I.c., p. 444ff.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Bruhn, M.: Messung von Kundenzufriedenheit im Rahmen Nationaler Kundenbarometer, I.c., p. 447ff.

"Kundenmonitor Deutschland"). Following these concepts corresponding projects were introduced after that in further countries, for example in Norway, Austria and Switzerland.

Starting point is the conviction that customer satisfaction is an important indicator for the performance of an enterprise and that this at first rather microeconomic model is transferable on branches or even the entire national economy. The objective is thus a future-oriented supplement of the usual descriptive statistical methods of measurement (e.g. shares of the market) up to the extraction of long-term indicators for the economical success of an enterprise, a branch or a national economy.

It follows already from the described objectives that here in the first place it is not a question of the consideration of consumer interests, also when absolutely the examined criteria seem to consider the point of view of the consumers. In the Swedish model the satisfaction opinion was determined only by means of three components: Total satisfaction, confirmation of the expectations, distance to the ideal product respectively -service. The investigation in the customer monitor Germany is more concrete and more differentiated on the other hand. Here the satisfaction of the customers with single, branch-relevant performance factors is inquired, as e.g. kindness, reliability, professional competence, accessibility of the employees of the customer contact, quickness of the processing, cost/performance ratio.

Satisfaction with branches or single enterprises is asked accordingly in part directly, derived also from a bundle of variables. It is mainly a question in this case of the experiences of the consumers, about positive as also negative characteristic in the provider customer relationship by means of different criteria and finally particularly around the aspect customer loyalty, that is of central importance for the enterprises and the actual purpose of the investigation of customer satisfaction.

The EU commission with their consumer barometer pursues a little different approach<sup>10</sup>, because here the enterprises are not in the centre of consideration as users of the determined data, but the politics both on EU level and on level of the member states. The supervision of the markets from consumer perspective is explained objective furthermore. In this respect in fact an element of the consumer interest is here of central importance and is mentioned as a reason for the realization of the corresponding studies.

Explanation of this is, that the policy wants to support the idea of the common market on EU-level and that the consumer absolutely should to be included. The still existing deficiencies in this process of development are seen among other things, that the consumers not yet profit as wanted by the common market. In order to counter this grievance, a very offensive information policy is pursued. Consumer in the EU are supposed to be informed about the deficits in the common market, to use possible imbalances for their advantage and to contribute to a market balance and a promotion of the common market in this way.

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Commission of the European Communities: Monitoring consumer outcomes in the single market, Second edition of the Consumer Markets Scoreboard, Brussels, COM(2009) 25/3

The actual data investigation in the consumer barometer of the EU-commission occurs, however, similarly as at the customer monitors designed in the interest of the suppliers. Single branches are investigated and with respect to one supplier with whom the interviewee gained experiences, the satisfaction is investigated in detail with single aspects as offer relevance, safety, technical support, accessibility, price transparency and so forth. Apparently the concept hardly distinguishes, although it was mainly supposedly created for the policy and the consumers, from the models which were laid down expressly in the interest of the enterprises. A consumer-driven approach is not to be recognized also in the EU-model.

#### **4. Further fundamental criticism points at existing concepts of measuring**

##### **4.1. Customer satisfaction measurement in existing structures of supply**

The relatively one-sided direction to the matters and interests of the supplier side at the conceptual design of the known investigations for the customer satisfaction measurement was referred to already repeatedly. The consideration of the up to now developed models which are used in the case of satisfaction surveys shows a further fundamental problem: The satisfaction inquiry always bases itself on the existing market and supply structures. These are accepted as given. Even if the analysis is carried out very in detail, this approach is not overcome or changed, the measurement occurs exclusively on the basis of the existing relations. Whether actually these, however, are in the sense of the consumers, is not questioned.

This approach unsatisfactory from consumer's point of view is in a system-dependent way contained in all known models, therefore also in the consumer barometer of the EU commission, that is supposed to achieve a market investigation from consumer view. The purpose of this EU-barometer is different indeed from the usual customer monitors, which take only the supplier interest into consideration, the system inherent disadvantages occur, however, in same manner. The existing offer is starting point of the consideration. Attention is paid to the true consumer interests only inadequately in this case.

##### **4.2. The problem of the quality estimation**

Next to all other critical objections about the usual practice in the case of customer satisfaction measurements there is another basic problem of measuring, that astonishingly is little noticed, although it is for all models of elementary importance. Regardless of whether an investigation is operated possibly with a great number of variables, always the result is dependent on the subjective quality assessment of the consulted consumer. The quality expectation and the quality opinion determine the satisfaction opinion.

Whether, however, the quality estimation is anyway sufficiently founded by the customers, is not discussed as a problem in the case of investigations for the customer satisfaction mostly

since this question is not essential from supplier's point of view. Only the weighing is important: Is my marketing strategy for the obtaining of the wanted customer loyalty correct or must I change something? Whether this question is answered due to correct or wrong and/or distorted quality assessment, is in this case unimportant for the supplier. It is only important that a satisfaction opinion, which then a positive or negative consumer behaviour is derived from, is achieved. Also this dealing with the feedback of the consumers makes in turn clearly that it is not a question of the true consumer interests here.

#### **4.2.1. Possibilities and limitations of the quality estimation by consumers**

As a matter of course the answer of the question about possibilities and limitations of the quality estimation by consumers requires a differentiated consideration. There are certainly, of course, clear manageable products or services that are to be assessed without any doubt appropriately. In the same way there are consumers, who are on certain fields experts and therefore capable to qualified assessments. Both is, however, rather the exception. In most cases products and services are much too complex and can not be assessed in all dimensions, as quality results from many different individual aspects, which do absolutely not have to be visible all of them correctly. In the same way it is completely impossible to have high competences in all possible issues in same manner in order to completely surely be able to assess a quality.

The normal case is accordingly a restricted, incomplete ability to assess by laymen. Accordingly also the assessment for the satisfaction can suffice for only rarely in fact objective claims, but normally to represent only a subjective, incomplete and basically inadequate assessment.

These deficiencies, of course, do not have to be unavoidably problematic for the suppliers interested at customer loyalty during the assessment of the question, whether quality can be assessed reliably, especially if one does not have the claim of a reliable quality determination at all, because the objective correctness of the quality determination is unimportant for the target of a better customer loyalty basically. Nevertheless one should be cautious with conclusions and not make the mistake, to turn the satisfaction opinion into the standard for true quality estimation. Possibly both does not have to do anything with each other.

#### **4.2.2. Influencing of the satisfaction by subjective sensation**

Satisfaction is always a subjective value as a result of the described comparison between opinion and expectation. For consumers with different quality expectations completely identical products or services activate different satisfaction perceptions. But also at otherwise same expectations the subjective quality opinion about an identical offer for two consumers must be not unavoidably identical. The subjective opinion can be better in a case than in another case, without there having to be an objective reason for that.

Greater reliability in the satisfaction perception can be achieved if the subjective feeling is supported by objective criteria. This is always the case, when objective measured values become component of the satisfaction perception. For example the in fact measured values to the petrol consumption of a car can activate satisfaction more or less with the consumer. In spite of that the satisfaction with a car is in addition determined by numerous subjective, also emotionally influenced criteria. Measurable, objective criteria determine the total satisfaction only partially.

The weighting within an entire program package of objective and subjective criteria can be highly individually marked. Objective criteria are not in this case better by any means than subjective. Objective criteria might be at best more stable than subjective, because there is less tendency to question and to doubt objective criteria. On the other hand subjective criteria can be subjected to a re-evaluation and new adjustment within the individual criterion catalogues for the satisfaction assessment more easily. About the appropriateness of one or the other kind of criteria nothing is in this way said. They can be both suitable in same manner for the determination of the individual satisfaction.

#### **4.2.3. Influences outside of the own experience horizon**

Normally the consumers are conscious that they can not understand a product or a service in all dimensions and therefore also the satisfaction perception is highly imperfect. Therefore one is thankful for supports of all kind. However, it does not remain normally with simple neutral information which extends only the knowledge about the offer and improves the basis in this way for the satisfaction perception. This would be an approach theoretical in that.

The reality looks completely different. Next to simple neutral information many more influences flow in onto consumers, which would be able to modify the quality expectation decisively as also the quality opinion and thus both components of the satisfaction perception.

It begins with an offer mostly already with the first contact if this contact is based on advertising of the suppliers. Provided that this advertising draws the attention of the consumer and a purchase is taken into consideration, one is interested at continuing information of all kind. At best one finds for example a neutral, independent product test during the information search.

Often people in addition ask also about further information, however. One is just in the same way impressible to further advertising or apparently objective reports, whose intentions possibly dominated by certain interests one can always not understand, because often the reporting is just as little neutral in the media as the direct advertising of the suppliers. Whether for example an expert opinion is in fact neutral or influenced by certain interests can often be recognized for laymen heavily.

All this information that exceeds the own experience horizon and complements the deficient own knowledge influences in any case the quality expectation and in this way also the satisfaction opinion. Thus the satisfaction assessment is influenced from many different directions, and it is difficult to differentiate between well-founded own assessment and manipulation of outside.

Next to that another further trend with considerable effects on the perceptions of the consumers intensifies just in the last years in the advertising. Already before decades became for example in the Cigarette- or attempted also in the car advertising, to sell not only the product, but an attitude to life. In the meantime this pattern is to be observed in many branches. The manipulation by advertising exceeds the actual product advertising more and more and removes itself from the respective offer at the same time.

Especially in the advertising for brands the information about the applied offer is overlapped often by the image of the brand. The advertising is used particularly for supporting a specific brand consciousness. The suppliers discovered the importance of this strategy just with regard to the younger consumers. In newer studies<sup>11</sup> it was shown that the brand consciousness is especially obvious with children and young people and that for example for eight to fourteen year old people in the USA almost all purchase decisions are found due to brand preferences.

With increasing age the brand orientation is not indeed more so extremely marked, it has, however, considerable influence on purchase decisions and satisfaction opinions in spite of that. Often such advertising campaigns are intensified by especially emotional messages or by the involvement of popular prominent persons. By purchase and use of a product of this brand the consumer is recognized part of this positive environment and thereby respected in his social environment. The quality of the product comes at that into the background. Satisfaction turns out by acquisition and possession of a certain brand, which currently lies in the trend and is associated with a positive image.

#### **4.2.4. Influencing by various "prejudices"**

In addition the assessment of the satisfaction is still influenced by many more factors. The satisfaction is dependent in particular on that, under which circumstances the previous consumption decision was achieved.

If one decided for a certain offer in a positive, optimistic basic atmosphere from a variety of available alternatives, one is usually already in a state of relative satisfaction with this consumption decision. One would like to see the correctness of this consumption decision confirmed in the further course and incorporates confirmative impressions benevolently. One

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<sup>11</sup> cf. Gottschalk, I.: Stand der Forschung zur Kommerzialisierung von Kindheit und Schule, in Schriftenreihe des Verbraucherzentrale Bundesverbandes zur Verbraucherpolitik, Band 8: Werbung und Sponsoring in der Schule, p. 18ff.

is corresponding at first rather repelling against impressions that could be suitable to qualify the found consumption decision as a false decision. Satisfaction is desired.

The atmosphere picture is completely different, if the freedom of choice was restricted during the consumption decision, one did not have any other choice basically or the decision was imposed. In this situation dissatisfaction predominates. Impressions in context with the product or the service encounter a rather negative, sceptical attitude. In such an environment when anyway only in small measure satisfaction can arise, dissatisfaction is rather desired.

In both described variants satisfaction can not be perceived objectively and neutrally, but it is preset by the respective initial situation. The measurement of the customer satisfaction moves from the beginning in a certain scale range. This effect can be read off in current satisfaction studies very clearly.

In the "customer monitor Germany 2009"<sup>12</sup> with the averages of the global satisfaction on a scale of 1 ("completely satisfied") until 5 ("dissatisfied") distance-selling pharmacies with 1,73 and opticians with 1,93 are reaching noticeable good values, on the other hand electricity suppliers with 2,59 and gas suppliers with 2,75 relatively bad assessments. In the case of online-pharmacies and stationary trade with extremely high provider density the consumer has a marked freedom of choice and feels in a strong position, since he could switch to another provider in the case of dissatisfaction without problems. In the case of electricity or gas suppliers this freedom of choice is of rather theoretical kind. In the practice the willingness to change the supplier is particularly not developed. One feels left at the mercy of the provider and in a weak, restricted position.

Similar contexts are shown in the case of the results of the second edition of the consumer barometer released by the EU commission in February 2009<sup>13</sup>. Interestingly both the best and the worst satisfaction value was investigated in the field "traffic". The maximum of 80 % of satisfaction was investigated within the consumers in the EU for "new cars", therefore for a product, with which normally a carefully weighed decision in a competition market quite functioning from consumer's view is preceded and a corresponding satisfaction is wanted, while consumers are least satisfied only with 45 % with the "intra-urban traffic", an offer, consumers are handed over helplessly without choice and avoiding-possibility. It is accordingly obvious that desired satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction have considerable influence on the actual satisfaction opinion.

Numerous secondary aspects of the consumption decision have also influence on the satisfaction opinion. If I have spent a lot of money for a product relatively, I expect a higher measure of satisfaction than at a cheap purchase which I made forcedly. Relatively expensive products enjoy therefore a certain advanced confidence, which is shown also in greater satisfaction.

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<sup>12</sup> cf. [http://www.servicebarometer.com/artikel/download/ranking\\_globalzufriedenheit\\_2009.pdf](http://www.servicebarometer.com/artikel/download/ranking_globalzufriedenheit_2009.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> cf. Commission of the European Communities: Monitoring consumer outcomes in the single market, Second edition of the Consumer Markets Scoreboard, Brussels, COM(2009) 25/3, p. 8

The brand and the fashion are further factors, which set a certain measure of satisfaction already with the purchase decision without this having to be justified from neutral sight. Sometimes satisfaction or dissatisfaction with certain offers lies "in the trend". The social atmosphere influences the individual satisfaction.

Consumers are highly unlikely to be able to find their satisfaction assessment in fact autonomously faced with the diverse performance-influencing factors.

#### **4.2.5. Problems with the differentiated satisfaction perception**

There like to be consumers which are capable in spite of the diverse influences to differentiated satisfaction perception, however, one will hardly be able to expect this from the mass market especially as the subsequent consideration is neither important nor interesting from consumer's point of view. The considerations might be for instance as follows: A consumer decided for a certain offer or had to decide for lack of alternatives for a certain offer. Now he must arrange himself with this made decision. The question, whether he is in fact satisfied with the product or the service, is not asked to him first of all. It will be probably of interest in a certain moment, when he must find a new consumption decision. Whether he will remember all satisfaction-relevant facets which emerged into context with the old offer sometime then, however, is extremely questionable.

It is to be presumed anyhow that satisfaction assessments can be changed with time considerably. Certain aspects are felt to certain moments differently than at former or later times. Also the importance of single aspects can change itself in the course of time. The importance of a certain aspect, which had influenced still the former consumption decision significantly, becomes increasingly more unimportant. Maybe turned around some things, which did not play yet any role with the decision, are recognized as important also only long after the purchase. The satisfaction assessment is not accordingly a constant term. It can turn out to different times differently. Particularly the question about the satisfaction loses its importance if no current involvement is given.

Thus data investigations for the customer satisfaction are influenced often by small current interest, what leads to considerable uncertainty unavoidably with the satisfaction assessments. Apparently precise evaluations for specific products display therefore possibly rather general assessments for the affecting branch. It turned back, however, also problematically, to ask for the satisfaction with certain branches, if these are marked by extremely heterogeneous elements with corresponding fluctuation ranges with respect to the satisfaction. Both variants are only restrictedly usable for an appropriate measurement of the customer satisfaction. The basic problem consists also here in the possible discrepancy between the item of the measurement and the actual objective of the measurement, that is an appropriate statement about the customer satisfaction.

### 4.3. Consequences for the satisfaction measurement

The different factors, which influence the perception of the consumers, make doubt about whether consumers can assess quality normally correctly. In this case missing professionalism for the correct assessment about a product or a service is only an aspect among many. Numerous further here described performance-influencing factors, which distort the quality perception in many kinds of respect or falsify the quality perception, are even more serious.

Since according to definition the satisfaction is the result of the comparison between quality expectation and quality opinion, the results of any customer satisfaction measurement must be doubted. They can not supply hardly in fact correct results.

From the viewpoint of the providers the results of the satisfaction analyses carried out by them themselves in spite of that can be useful. It does not have to be a question of correct measurement of the true quality opinion of the consumers for them but only of measurement of the marketing success. This does not have to be based, however, on truth by any means but it can be to be put down in the same way also to misjudgements and manipulations.

From the viewpoint of the consumers this result is disillusioning. It is obvious, that the consumer also, where apparently it is a question of his own best interests, indeed in the case of the measurement of his satisfaction, is looked only as an object, that only simply must "function well" under the conditions arranged by the providers. Whether this functioning is based on correct assessments and informed decisions or on errors and manipulations is not far too important for the suppliers. Their interest particularly is directed on the correct positioning of the own offer and the reactions of the consumers towards the offer.

It seems, that the lack of reference to the actual consumer interest in the case of the satisfaction measurement, as it is today usually carried out, is not decisive important for the users of this information.

For the objectives, which the suppliers pursue with the customer satisfaction measurement, very different aspects are important. They want to find out generally how the offer is accepted by the customer. In addition all single criteria that characterize the offer more precisely are investigated in their effect, for example the image, the design, the service quality, the reliability and many things more. Finally it is a matter of finding out, whether a customer loyalty arose, which factors might influence the relationship to the customer possibly and which factors might be improved.

For the determination of the customer satisfaction from supplier's point of view it is accordingly also unimportant, whether the customer is a private end consumer or a commercial client. It is a question only of the customer as recipient of the offered service or buyer of the offered product. The status of the customer is not important. In the centre of the consideration there is always the offer and the kind as the offer is accepted by the addressee of the offer. With the term "customer" not always the end user is meant.

In order to counter these possible misunderstandings that can be combined with the term "customer" and to describe the actual interest situation more correctly, it would be more precise to speak not of a measurement of the customer satisfaction, but of a measurement of the acceptance of the offer, because in the centre of the consideration is not the consumer but the market offer and the question decisive from supplier's point of view: How can I strengthen the acceptance of my offer in the market in order to improve the customer loyalty and to gain shares of the market? The use of the term "acceptance of the offer" instead of "customer satisfaction" it would clarify by the way that the offer is the subject, that is supposed to be examined nearer, during the customer, whose satisfaction is supposed to be the matter of investigation, is the object only.

The different point of view of suppliers and consumers is clear also with respect to the question of the customer loyalty. This is in the centre of all customer satisfaction considerations for the providers, as already repeatedly was stressed. On the other hand customer loyalty is by far less interesting for consumers. Only in the case of certain service offers and in few specific supplier-consumer-constellations customer loyalty can become an important feature of the relationship to the supplier also from the view of the consumers. On the other hand a larger distance exists towards the manufacturers of products and also towards traders in general.

Most consumers are conscious that a critical distance is important towards suppliers in order to be able to find later consumption decisions with an open mind. A customer loyalty, as it is searched by suppliers, therefore in most cases by any means is not in the sense of the consumers. Accordingly not only the starting points but also the objectives with the measurement of customer satisfaction are completely different.

A correspondence of the usual customer satisfaction methods of measurement with the actual consumer interest would be obvious rather by chance. The consumer interest does not play any role in the usual models. Also in the concept of the consumer barometer of the EU commission, which is supposed to perform a consideration from consumer viewpoint, no in fact consumer-driven approach is contained, since also this model takes the given offer and market structures as a basis and mainly examines the enterprise-related question formulations interesting for suppliers and does not focus on the strictly offer-related question formulations important for consumers. Whether in fact the available market constellations are in the interest of the consumers and activate actual satisfaction is not discussed as a problem.

## **5. Customer satisfaction measurement from consumer's point of view**

It was shown that the available models for the measurement of customer satisfaction can hardly be in the situation to show the actual consumer interest both because of the inadequate satisfaction perception of the consumers and because of the exclusive orientation of the evaluation at the available offer and market structures as well as because of the inadequate consideration of the viewpoint of the consumers. A model that wants to measure customer satisfaction from consumer's point of view must search therefore one completely other starting point. Subsequently a multistage model, which could facilitate a consumer-oriented satisfaction measurement, is presented.

### **5.1. Determination of the "true" consumer needs**

This other approach must not support itself either on satisfaction with an enterprise or a branch or onto the available offer, but must begin on a former level, indeed with the actual needs of the consumers. It is a question therefore first of all of determining the true needs as unaffectedly of present general conditions as possible. This is relatively difficult since the needs are influenced by the experiences which one had with various offers or enterprises. It is, however, possible not to fixate on certain offers, but to take a neutral position outside of the present offers. The needs are defined indeed in knowledge of these offers; the starting point is, however, not the offer but the need and the expectation of the consumers.

It is a question on this level of the actual consumption activity accordingly first of all. This can be a relatively simple and clearly outlined need as e.g. "to drink apple juice", therefore a need for which no further differentiation is necessary. Most consumption activities contain, however, more than only one aspect. The activity "making a telephone call" contains for example one product- and one service aspect, which must be considered separately from each other. The activity "to undertake a holiday trip" can be separated according to concrete kind of the realization into different partial aspects (means of transportation, accommodation, optionally tour operator) and subdivide the activity in many subsets of the system in turn on this basis in each case. Objective is the separation of more complex consumption needs into partial needs which can be examined and evaluated separately and clearly.

### **5.2. Determination of the performance, necessary to the need satisfaction**

Departing from the determined needs it is found out which product and/or which service this need can satisfy. At in order to facilitate a differentiated determination, investigation and evaluation of the single elements possibly offered combinations of several elements (e.g. mobile telephone with camera function) should be divided into single elements. For the need "mobile phoning" is first of all only the mobile telephone in its telephone function of interest. A possible extra option (camera) should be considered and evaluated separately.

Certainly, however, also a consumption need “combined telephoning and photographing” is conceivable. Also in this case the separate consideration of the functions is first of all necessary, the evaluations must be combined, however, later for a total evaluation.

### **5.3. Set up of evaluation criteria**

A similarly differentiated procedure is then necessary during the preparation of a suitable criterion catalogue. The offer is to be dissected as exactly as possible into partial aspects, from which simple and clear results are to be derived. Every form of combination of several performance elements is to be avoided, instead of this combined services must be dissected into partial aspects to be evaluated separately.

This procedure corresponds to the usual working method in the case of the draft of a test program in the comparative product test. First of all a list with all consumer-relevant features is put together. This is dependent on the respective product or the respective service and can be therefore more or less extensive. For many offers the list is relatively long.

In this context it is to notice that the product test organizations are obligated to the consumer interest alone. For example it was decided by the jurisprudence of the supreme courts in Germany for the benefit of the Stiftung Warentest<sup>14</sup>, that in the interest of the consumers in the check criteria also higher requirements can be contained than in corresponding DIN-standards. This is valid in particular in the case of the aspects of safety and health.

Apparently the criticism points which were classified above as "little consumer-oriented" are avoided while setting up evaluation criteria by the product testers exactly so that this perspective change is different from the usual models of the customer satisfaction measurement basically. In addition the evaluation criteria focus here on the actual offer in fact as it is desired from consumer view.

The evaluations are in accordance with scientific requirements since they are measurable and comprehensible. In contrast satisfaction questioning of the known monitors suffers often from relatively abstract terms (as e.g. "services") being asked, which can be interpreted absolutely differently and therefore are not answered under any circumstances with homogeneous standard. That such "planned uncertainty" in spite of that is accepted is to be declared only by the suppliers not being interested at such details because for them it is more a question of a general impression of customer satisfaction.

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<sup>14</sup> cf. Stiftung Warentest: 40 Jahre Stiftung Warentest, Berlin 2004, p. 71f.

#### 5.4. Evaluations by consumers and/or experts

After a differentiated criterion catalogue exists, it must be consulted to check whether this can be evaluated correctly by the single consumer; it means whether a satisfaction measurement alone is anyway possible by the consumer or whether for that external assistance is necessary. Of course that depends on the individual case.

For products the evaluation is mostly difficult for laymen because often technical examinations or chemical analyses are necessary here. Already the evaluation of a simple food is not possible for the individual since his evaluation competence might be restricted to the aspects taste and appearance, which does only, however, obviously not facilitate any sufficient satisfaction measurement. He must leave the qualitative analysis going on to experts.

As a matter of course the correct satisfaction assessment is almost impossible for laymen also in the case of technical products. A demonstrative example is the subsequently represented list of features that are examined in a comparative product test for flat screen television sets<sup>15</sup>:

Criterion catalogue "flat screen television set":

Picture (Weighting 40 %):

- Picture quality: Pal-video with Scart
- Picture quality: Pal-video with HDMI
- Picture quality / sensitiveness analogous tuner
- Picture quality / sensitiveness DVB-T-tuner
- Picture quality / sensitiveness DVB-C-tuner
- HDTV: Picture quality
- Photo: Picture quality via DVD / USB or card reader
- Picture quality as a PC monitor
- Picture error measured / picture jerking
- Viewing angle / reflection poverty

Tone (Weighting 20 %)

Handling (Weighting 25 %):

- Instructions / installation and connections
- Daily use / Enlarged functions
- Handling: USB, memory card
- Handling: EPG / videotextZapping analogous / digital
- Screen menu
- Handling with remote control / at the device

Versatility (Weighting 5 %)

Environmental properties (Weighting 10 %):

- Power consumption in operation / in standby
- Problematic flame-retardants

The here indicated weighting of the individual points from which the total evaluation is derived from can be different with individual consumers and does not have to agree by any

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<sup>15</sup> cf. Stiftung Warentest: test 12/2008, p. 48

means with the weighting which the Stiftung Warentest carries out. In the in parallel offered online-version of this test this is incorporated. Here the user can evaluate his preferences individually.

Obviously the single consumer can not achieve the complete acquisition of this catalogue of features. If need be he can consider single aspects. It will be to him therefore hardly, in order to stay with this example, possible to determine his "true satisfaction" with a flat screen television set. He is dependent on supports as this detailed product test supplies it. Only this might clarify clearly, that independent comparative product tests are an indispensable component of our present consumption world.

Next to that there are, however, also fields in which the satisfaction determination can be assessed more easily. Particularly there exist some services with which layman and expert perspectives can hardly distinguish. The following example on the topic "Consultation to mobile communications rates" clarifies this<sup>16</sup>:

Criterion catalogue "Consultation to mobile communications rates"

Consultation quality (Weighting 65 %)

- Rate consultation
- Specialist knowledge
- Mediation competence

Service (Weighting 35 %)

- Consultation and waiting times
- Behaviour of the consultants
- Availability of the consultants, opening times

This test program can be comprehended relatively easily so that every interested one can determine his own satisfaction with the consultation to mobile communications rates. Of course this is to be distinguished carefully from the very different topic "mobile communications rate". These are to be tested by means of an own test catalogue which would mainly have to determine the rate components and rate conditions.

Another example from the service area is the satisfaction assessment for a hotel overnight stay. The following criterion catalogue<sup>17</sup> can be comprehended theoretically in spite of its extent by every overnight stay guest:

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<sup>16</sup> cf. Stiftung Warentest: test 01/2009, p. 50

<sup>17</sup> cf. Stiftung Warentest: test 05/2009, p. 81

Criterion catalogue "hotel overnight stay":

Room (Weighting 50 %):

Room equipment living- sleeping area:

State of preservation

Cleanness

Equipment:

Seat furniture

Technical equipment

Storage space

Bed:

Size

Convenience

Cleanness

Functionality:

Spaciousness

Light

Curtain possibilities

Sanitary area:

Wash basin:

Functionality

Equipment

State of maintenance

Toilet:

Functionality

Equipment

State of maintenance

Shower/bathtub:

Functionality

Equipment

State of maintenance

Breakfast (Weighting 20 %):

Breakfast offer:

Variety

Freshness impression

Breakfast room and service:

Seat possibilities and tables

Functionality

Spaciousness

State of maintenance of the room

Breakfast times

Assistance to the buffet

Information and booking in the Internet (Weighting 10 %)

Accommodation search

Room booking

Payment process

Booking confirmation

Service offers (Weighting 10 %)

Opening- and check-in-times

Left-luggage office

Internet access

City information

Snack-/drink offer

Public rooms (Weighting 10 %):

Reception:

Functionality

Equipment

State of maintenance  
 Lounge:  
     Functionality  
     Equipment  
     State of maintenance  
 Bar/café:  
     Functionality  
     Equipment  
     State of maintenance  
 Halls:  
     Functionality  
     Equipment  
     State of maintenance  
 Elevators:  
     Functionality  
     Equipment  
     State of maintenance

At one special point it is especially clear that it is a question here of a criterion catalogue for consumers which can be used without expert support: the criterion "freshness impression" is listed under the point "breakfast offer". Of course the criterion "freshness" would be to be preferred here, which can not be realized without expert support.

Basically diverse combined forms are conceivable, however, according to product or service and the evaluation catalogue for that individually set up. There are criteria which can be assessed well by affected laymen. Next to that there are such which must be examined and evaluated obligatory by experts.

As a principle idea for the task sharing in the evaluation should be regarded:  
 Criteria which can be assessed by affected consumers appropriately should be evaluated also by these. Only for criteria which can not be assessed by consumers appropriately the collaboration of independent experts is necessary for the evaluation.

### **5.5. Necessary cooperation between consumers and experts**

For an appropriate implementation of the here suggested concept of a consumer-oriented customer satisfaction measurement the narrow cooperation is absolutely necessary between consumers and experts. The work programme for this cooperation would look following the above described successive procedure for the satisfaction measurement as follows:

- Identify of the actual consumer needs
- Identify of appropriate product/service for the need satisfaction
- Identify of evaluation criteria from consumer viewpoint
- Identify of the consumer assessment competence for the single criteria
- Differentiate the criteria according to consumer assessment competence
  - Evaluating of the criteria, with which there is competence, by consumers
  - Evaluating of the remaining criteria by experts
- Combine the different evaluations into complete total evaluation

The cooperation between consumers and experts is practised in the product test already indeed to some extent, however, these approaches certainly would have to be built up and would have to be organized more basically in order to avoid that the test work misses the actual consumer interests.

During the practical implementation the question how the consumer interests can be articulated and organized will arise. For that already numerous useful approaches are available in the Internet with various assessment portals, and the development of communication increased too and networking might prove as it is propagated under the keyword "Web 2.0" to be very helpful.

Of course it must be observed always carefully whether in such internet portals real consumer interests are articulated since it is not always recognizable whether any forums are misused by suppliers to advertising-purposes. Also one finds on the occasion of portals in which consumers comment on topics in which they do not have any sufficient evaluation competence. For example subjective evaluations of medical services of doctors and hospitals are problematic, if the medical specialist knowledge is missing or if the evaluation is mainly measured by the subjective individual success of therapy. In order to avoid such mistakes, the correct identification of the actual evaluation competences is especially important.