The Art of Breaking Up

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Past research has tended to focus on why consumers break up with their service provider, but not on how they break up. More specifically, research has not investigated the strategies that consumers have used and considered using to action their break up. Using phenomenology, we set out to explore how consumers contemplate and/or action their exit with a service provider. Based on the emerging themes within the findings, we develop a model of emotional conflict, the extent to which influences whether the strategies used by the consumer in the break up process are simple or complex in nature.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When contemplating departure from your loved one, you are faced with a myriad of considerations. What strategies will you use? Will you dump them with etiquette or take the easy option of never returning their call? Will it be short and sweet, or long and excruciating? In light of this diversity, it can be appreciated that the break up process is easy for some yet difficult for others. During our life, we begin many types of relationships which at some point in time may end. The dissolution of a relationship with a service provider forms the focus of this study.

The literature on service exits has examined causal determinants (Keaveney 1995, Coulter and Ligas 2000), switching costs (Jones, Mothersbaugh, and Beatty 2000; Burnham, Frels, and Mahajan 2003) and interpersonal relationship theories of dissolution (Fajer and Schouten 1995, Hocutt 1998). There has been a tendency to focus on why consumers break up with their service provider, but not on how they break up. More specifically, research has not investigated the strategies that consumers have used and considered using to action their break up.

Given this gap, this paper sets out to explore the way in which consumers contemplate and/or action their exit with a service provider. We develop a model of emotional conflict the extent to which, influences whether the strategies used in the break up process are simple or complex in nature. This paper builds on the work of Keaveney (1995) who defines simple switching as “involving one category or factor” and complex switching as “involving more than one category or factor”. Keaveney’s list of factors are causal determinants of why people switch service providers. In our study however, we find that it is the emotion attributed to the cause/situation and to the service provider which are more influential in determining switching behaviour. In consideration of this finding, Keaveney’s simple and complex labels are redefined in terms of the level of emotional conflict felt by the consumer.

In order to investigate the exit process, a phenomenological inquiry was conducted as it would allow for the subjective meaning of the consumers’ experiences to emerge uninhibited (Goulding 1998) and “unadulterated by preconceptions.” (Heron 1992, p.164). The data was collected by means of unstructured interviews (Crotty 1998). Three informants were selected as cases for this study (Fournier 1998). The nature of the relationship and the nature of the dissolution were investigated. For those who had not executed the break up, the contemplation of the break up was explored. The range of service providers examined here included an accountant, an architect and a solicitor. The interviews were taped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) recommended approach. In order to assess trustworthiness and establish conformability, triangulation across researchers was conducted (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

Based on the findings, a preliminary model was inducted. This model was founded on the concept of emotional conflict, a strong theme which was evident across all of the informants. It is proposed that emotional conflict is a measure of the discrepancy between the emotions a consumer attributes toward the service situation (e.g. angry at service failure) and the emotions a consumer attributes toward their service provider (e.g. liking and sympathy for accountant). More specifically, it is proposed that a low (high) degree of emotional conflict occurs when the emotions attributed to the situation and the emotions attributed towards the service provider are similar (dissimilar) in valence.

The findings presented the concept of emotional conflict and its relationship with the type of exit process in relation to the three case studies. The story of Thomas and his accountant Colin provided an example of a complex goodbye, defined by a high degree of emotional conflict. This was reflected by the moral struggle between Thomas’ dissatisfaction with the service situation and the empathy and sympathy he felt towards Colin “the old man”. Examples of the complexity were evidenced in Thomas’ goodbye strategies; his use of “time” as a strategic method of delay; his fling with another accountant; his consideration of the use of lying to alleviate the emotional burden, his prediction of what his accountant’s counter response would be to the lie, and his contemplation of using a future accountant to do his ‘dirty work’.

This story can be juxtaposed to the story of Stavros and David his solicitor. In this case, the emotions experienced were purely of a negative nature. The feelings Stavros felt about the situation, anger and frustration, were the same as those he felt towards the service provider. Hence, his emotions were not conflicting with each other. Based on this, his exit strategy was found to be relatively straightforward as he simply went into the office unannounced and demanded his papers back “and that was it”. This finding illustrated a simple exit process.

Finally, the story of Kate and Fabian provided further evidence of a complex break up. In this case, Kate was torn between salvaging a friendship and ending a professional relationship which had gone sour. Kate enjoyed Fabian’s company and their friendship was emotionally gratifying. On the other hand, Kate felt betrayed and disappointed in the professional relationship that they shared. Kate experienced a high degree of emotional conflict. Examples of the complexity were evidenced in Kate’s goodbye strategies; a long elaboration time, collecting and using the evidence as an ‘emotional shield’, strategizing a confrontation where Fabian could not refute her, suppressing her emotions during the planned confrontation and most importantly focusing on not jeopardizing the friendship.

The question is, how do you end a relationship with someone you feel sorry for or like? Someone who provides you with a service and who you are also close friends with? How do you deal with the emotions experienced? How do you say goodbye?

REFERENCES


