# Using Means-end Approaches to Understand Business Complaint Management

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## Abstract

This paper explores the nature of complaint management in business relationships. The particular emphasis is on the qualities and behaviours that affect buying companies as part of the complaint

handling encounter with a supplier. An exploratory empirical study using a 'hard' laddering approach provides a deeper understanding of the attributes of effective complaint management in business-to-business relationships, and reveals the underlying benefits that buying organizations are looking for when complaining. The research indicates that complaining companies perceive disruptions of their supplier relationships in the context of the business network within which they are embedded, especially *vis-à-vis* the benefits associated with long-term supplier ties, but also in the context of the effects on down-stream customers. Issues of effective complaint management in business-to-business settings therefore need to be addressed not just as isolated managerial activities with limited benefits for the parties involved, but should be seen as being part of a wider activity set of strategic networking activities with an impact on whole business systems. This study is the first application of a means-end and laddering approach to the area of understanding business-to-business complaint management. Besides this methodological contribution, our analysis and findings also enrich the existing limited stock of knowledge on complaint management in business relationships by developing a deeper understanding of the attributes (i.e. characteristics and behaviours) that complaining customer companies desire from suppliers, as well as the underlying business logic (i.e. values) for these expectations.

**Keywords**

Complaint Management, Business-to-Business, Supplier Relationships, Laddering, Means-End Approach

# Using Means-end Approaches to Understand Business Complaint Management

## Introduction

Understanding the management of relationships between companies has become an important aspect of contemporary marketing theory and practice (Anderson et al. 1994; Parolini 1999). In value-creating systems based on complex network exchanges, business marketing activities are often characterized by collaboration and cooperation with customers, suppliers, and other organizations

within the network (Achrol & Kotler 1999). This results in long-term business relationships which are based on a certain degree of trust, commitment, interdependence, as well as mutual relationship-specific investments (Andersen et al. 1994; Barnes et al. 2005; Barnes et al. 2007; Håkansson & Ford 2002; Morgan & Hunt 1994).

Relationships between companies have been extensively researched, juxtaposing them with transactional exchanges. The characteristics of these relationships have been linked to issues such as innovation, power, risk, as well as to overall company success (Deshpande et al. 2000; Ordanini et al. 2004; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), and are seen as an important competitive advantage in business markets. Furthermore, much research has focused on how relationships develop in following a life-cycle, and how these business relationships ultimately end (Lambe et al. 2000). While many structural aspects of the relationships between companies within business networks are well understood, the particular interaction patterns between companies which *result* in business relationships are insufficiently conceptualized (Möller & Halinen 1999; Uzzi 1997). This is especially true for aspects of complaint behaviour and complaint management in business-to-business settings. But things occasionally go wrong, even in close and well-performing buyer-supplier relationships. Inter-organizational complaint resolution is therefore an important aspect of ongoing business relationships. The managerial challenge in such cases is to understand how the companies involved, especially the suppliers, ought to behave to remedy such a situation by identifying the complaint management attributes which are desired by the complaining party. Of pivotal importance is to analyze why a certain complaint management attribute represents positive value to the customer (the complainant), and also how and why addressing a specific complaint provides the buying company with satisfaction, thereby contributing to continuing the business relationship (Hansen et al. 1996; Homburg & Fürst 2005).

By using a qualitative semi-standardized laddering technique in an exploratory way, our paper enhances the understanding of how buying companies operating within close business relationships

expect their complaints to be handled. Additionally, we link the identified complaint management attributes to desired higher-level company values, using a means-end approach. As such, our paper contributes to the understanding of business relationships in general, and to the business complaint management literature in particular. To our knowledge, it represents the first application of a laddering approach to a business-to-business complaint setting.

Our study will proceed as follows: after an initial overview of the extant literature on business-to-business complaint situations, the research methodology based on means-end theory is introduced. The research design using a hard laddering approach is discussed, before we show our data analysis method and findings. Theoretical as well as managerial implications conclude the study.

**Understanding Business Complaint Behaviour and Management**

While complaint behaviour, as well as the management of complaints, is a well researched area of business-to-consumer marketing (Johnston & Mehra 2002; Tax et al. 1998; Tronvoll 2007), the extant literature in business marketing is less well developed. This is surprising, since the importance of effective relationship management is consistently stressed in the business-to-business literature (Håkansson & Ford 2002; Low & Koon 1997; Ojasalo 2004). However, existing research mainly compares the way in which organizations handle complaints to the effect this has on buyer satisfaction (Durvasula et al. 2000). Homburg and Fürst (2005: 108) posit that "*after a complaint, loyalty depends essentially on complaint satisfaction and not as much on satisfaction that has cumulated over time*".

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Insert Table 1 about here
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Table 1 provides a parsimonious overview of relevant studies in business complaint behaviour as well as complaint management. A seminal starting point for research in this area is Trawick and Swan's (1981) proposed model of satisfaction within industrial *complaining behaviour*, consisting of process and attitudinal variables. A number of further studies (e.g. Dart & Freeman 1994; Hansen,

1997; Hansen et al. 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Hicks et al. 1996; Williams & Rao 1980) provided additional contextual clarifications. For example, comparing Dart and Freeman's (1994) results to Singh's (1990) original complaint typology for end consumer behaviour, revealed that there were differences between business buyers and final customer. The group exhibiting passive complaint behaviour, whose intentions to complain were below average on all factors, represented the biggest cluster with forty-two per cent of the business sample, as opposed to only fourteen per cent of Singh's end consumer sample.

Perrien, Paradis, and Banting's (1995) research specifically emphasizes the important roles of front line people. Analyzing the dissolution process of business relationships, they showed that account managers attributed more than ninety per cent of disengagement decisions to the behaviour of their own (selling) organization, with the main responsibility resting on unsatisfactory internal management and complaint procedures.

While there exists some understanding of complaint behaviour in business-to-business settings, studies investigating specifically the selling company's *complaint management* are rare. However, in a comparative setting, Homburg and Fürst (2005), analyzing business-to-business as well as business-to-consumer complaint management, found that a *mechanistic approach* based on establishing guidelines, and an *organic approach* based on creating a favourable internal environment, significantly influenced satisfaction levels of the complaining customer. However, the mechanistic approach showed a stronger overall impact, which was more pronounced in business-to-consumer compared to business-to-business settings, and with service firms compared to manufacturing firms.

In summary, not a great deal is known about the motivations for and expressions of business complaint behaviour, nor about the expectations regarding complaint management and resolution by business customers. Generally, more studies exist on issues of complaining behaviour than

specifically on complaint management, i.e. how to address complaints effectively within a business relationship. Most studies merely infer managerial implications from investigating complaint behaviour. However, Hicks, Hansen, Swan and Powers (1996) emphasize the importance of buyer involvement in resolving complaints successfully. Beyond these initial insights into business complaint management, no comprehensive and rigorous understanding of the *drivers* of effective complaint management has been developed. For such a conceptualization to exist, the link between expected complaint resolution attributes and buyer's value perceptions as part of means-end considerations needs to be explored, and therefore represents the focus of this study.

## Research Methodology and Design

Our research is designed as exploratory research, analyzing customer expectations in close business relationships regarding important aspects of complaint resolution attributes. In line with research done on similar topics in the business-to-consumer area (Gruber et al. 2006), a laddering technique is used for operationalization and analysis purposes.

### *Laddering Approach*

Laddering techniques and their foundation in means-end theory have not been used widely for research in business-to-business contexts. Some isolated studies exist, for example, laddering and means-end theory underpinned an investigation into loyalty drivers of business customers (Ringberg & Gupta 2003). Furthermore, Jarratt (1998) studied the nature of regional business alliances using unstructured laddering interviews. Means-end theory was also used with a small sample of ten respondents to explore supply chain partners' value matches and mismatches (Davis-Sramek et al. 2007). Our study is the first to use laddering approaches systematically in the context of business-to-business complaint management. It is somewhat surprising that this technique has hitherto been neglected in this area as it is widely used in consumer research, predominately for brand or product positioning issues (Gutman, 1982; Olson & Reynolds, 1983), and recently laddering has also been

applied to research areas such as sales management (Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2002), services marketing (Gruber et al. 2006; Voss et al. 2007), and new product development (Reppel et al**.** 2006).

Laddering is generally employed to reveal the relationships which exist between the attributes of products, services or individuals ("means"), the consequences these attributes represent for the respondent (e.g. a customer), and the personal values or beliefs which are strengthened or satisfied by the consequences ("ends") (Reynolds & Gutman 1988). *Attributes* are the tangible and intangible characteristics of an offering (in our study a complaint resolution). *Consequences* are the reasons why certain attributes are important to the customer. They are, according to Gutman (1982), the psychological, physiological or process results that customers think they can achieve by using the product or service (in our study, by achieving a certain complaint resolution result). *Value*s are the customers' universal life and company goals. They represent the most personal and general consequences individuals or organizations are striving for (Rokeach 1973). Consequences (a midlevel of abstraction) are more relevant to the self (i.e. a consumer, manager, or organization) than attributes (low level of abstraction); values (high level of abstraction) are in turn more relevant to the self than consequences (Olson & Reynolds 1983). Effectively this 'logic chain' describes a movement towards increasingly higher levels of abstraction and *desired ends*, reflecting progress from the offering to aspects of customers' and companies' self concepts and basic motivations (Gutman 1997).

Laddering usually involves semi-standardized personal in-depth interviews, with the interviewer probing to reveal attribute-consequence-value chains (i.e. 'ladders'). The interviewer repeatedly questions why an attribute, a consequence, or a value is important to the respondent, with the answer acting as the starting point for further questioning, until saturation is reached. Cognitive concepts gleaned during the laddering interview and analysis are summarised in a graphical representation of a set of means-end chains known as a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) (Gengler et al. 1995).

In our study we use a design based on a so-called *hard laddering* approach via questionnaires. This can be distinguished from soft laddering (Botschen & Thelen 1998), utilizing in-depth interviews where respondents are minimally restricted. In both cases, researchers gauge the meaning of the answers and develop a means-end model (Grunert et al. 2001). Hard laddering utilises a more systematic data collection technique such as structured interviews and questionnaires.

While the majority of published means-end studies (specifically in business-to-consumer research) have used soft laddering interviews, there has been some use of questionnaires to collect laddering data (Walker & Olson 1991). Botschen and Hemetsberger (1998) advocate hard laddering as it reduces interviewer bias and minimizes social pressure on the respondents so that they can decide when they want to end the laddering process. Furthermore, it is a much more cost- and time-efficient data collection method, easier to manage. It also takes less time to collect and analyse hard laddering data compared to soft laddering. Several researchers (e.g. Botschen & Hemetsberger 1998; Botschen & Thelen 1998; Goldenberg et al. 2000; Pieters et al. 1995) have employed a paper-and pencil version successfully. In this study, we decided to use questionnaires instead of conducting personal interviews, with each respondent receiving a detailed laddering explanation developed from existing instructions (Botschen & Hemetsberger 1998; Pieters et al. 1998).

***Study Design***

A hard laddering technique based on online-questionnaires was adopted. The detailed laddering explanations were extensively pre-tested, utilizing the process suggested by Botschen and Hemetsberger (1998). We randomly selected companies from a commercial list of the UK manufacturing industry, and telephoned managers with responsibility for supplier relationship management. These included positions such as purchasing managers, organizational buyers, and supply controllers. If a manager agreed to participate in our study, we sent him/her an email with a link to our online-questionnaire, developed and pre-tested according to suggested quality characteristics (Sheehan & McMillan 1999; Tse 1998). We framed the questionnaire in such a way

that the respondents were asked to consider particularly close business relationships with suppliers in which they had also experienced problems, and then to think about how they and their company would have liked this complaint to have been addressed. In particular, respondents were asked about how suppliers ought to handle their complaints and what kind of qualities or complaint management characteristics they would expect.

The online approach to data collection has several benefits: researchers do not have to record and transcribe laddering questionnaires as the collected data is already in electronic form. Furthermore, the whole process is argued to be less stressful and more convenient for respondents as they can fill in the laddering questionnaire at their own convenience (Wood et al. 2004). After pre-testing a laddering questionnaire attached to an email, we decided not to use this approach as several disadvantages became apparent: firstly, potential respondents decided not to download the attached questionnaire fearing computer viruses. Secondly, some respondents did not possess the necessary programmes to open the document. Finally, respondents had to return the filled-in document which they considered too demanding or time consuming (Gunter et al. 2002). We decided to create a website instead which hosted the questionnaire.

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked first to write down the three most important attributes or characteristics of a supplier's complaint management. They were urged to be as specific as possible. For this purpose, respondents were presented with three free text boxes to type in their chosen attributes, which then were referred to in the subsequent laddering questions. On the next screen page, respondents could use a large open text box to answer why the first attribute they had just identified was important to them. For this purpose they were, for example, asked "You have stated that one of the most important attributes or characteristic of a supplier in cases of complaints should be 'Take Responsibility'. Could you please explain to us what you mean by this and why exactly this attribute is important to you?" In a second prompted text box, respondents subsequently had to specify why what they indicated in the first box was important to them. If necessary, a third

(and additional boxes) continued in the same way. After having completed the laddering process for the first attribute, respondents were then prompted to fill in text boxes for the second and third most important supplier attributes as well.

***Data Collection***

Reynolds, Dethloff and Westberg, (2001) recommend that laddering studies should include at least twenty respondents. Such a sample size can give a significant understanding of the main attributes, consequences, and values of products, services or people. Forty-four questionnaires were used for our final analysis. We ceased further data collection at this point due to the fact that we had achieved theoretical saturation, in that no new or relevant data emerged, and all concept categories were well developed, with the linkages between categories well established (Strauss & Corbin 1998). We thus ended the study before our initially intended target of fifty respondents, in line with Coolen and Hoekstra's (2001) suggestion that the number of respondents for laddering interviews should not exceed fifty to sixty as such studies should be predominately explorative in nature with the focus on discovering relationships and hypotheses rather than testing them.

In order to ensure that non-response bias did not constitute a problem (Groves 1989; Moore & Tarnai 2002), we did further interviews. As we could not use the Armstrong and Overton (1977) approximation (i.e. the hypothesis that late respondents are more likely to be similar to non-respondents), we followed Mentzer, Flint and Hult's (2001) recommended guidelines by contacting a random sample of twenty non-respondent companies and asked them a subset of our questionnaire. A t-test showed no significant difference of group means between our sample and these 'non-respondents'; thus, we assume non-response bias to be unproblematic.

***Data Analysis***

The analysis of the data using a means-end interpretation logic was done in three stages, as recommended by Reynolds and Gutman (1988). Firstly, we coded sequences of attributes,

consequences and values (the 'ladder') to make comparisons across respondents. The decision-support software program LADDERMAP (Gengler & Reynolds 1993) was used to categorize each phrase from the questionnaire as either an attribute, consequence, or value. The first phase involved the development of meaningful categories so that comparable phrases and data points could be grouped together. Coding was an iterative exercise of recoding data, splitting, combining categories, generating new or dropping existing categories, in line with content analysis techniques (Krippendorff, 2004; Strauss & Corbin 1998). Following the approach of Gengler and Reynolds (1995) suggesting fifty categories, we developed specific codes for the first analysis and then combined them until a manageable number (sixty-two, see table 3) was reached. The identification of categories was through phrases and key words that respondents used in the online laddering questionnaires, as well as from concepts derived from the literature review and an adaptation of the Schwartz (1992) value list which provides an overview of generally held values. Grunert, Beckmann and Sørensen (2001) point out that researchers have a lot of latitude during the coding process. They, however, do argue that the coding reliability will benefit from having parallel coders and suggest that the analyst who has conducted the laddering interview "*will be the best possible coder because she or he will remember part of the context information (and also better be able to clarify matters by referring back to a tap*e)" (78). Furthermore, a second coder who does not possess context information is suggested to carry out the same coding task in a different way.

As no context information was available in this study due to the online nature of our data collection, we decided that two researchers with expertise in laddering analysis, but with limited knowledge of the business-to-business area, should do the initial independent data interpretation. After re-conciliation of coding differences, a third researcher with experience in business-to-business research independently coded the data and compared the findings with the initial conceptualization.

In the second stage, the number of associations between the constructs on different levels (attributes/consequences/values) was expressed by aggregating individual means-end chains across

respondents which resulted in an 'implications matrix', detailing the associations between the constructs. In an implication matrix (see table 2 for an example), rows represent the respondents' ladders, while columns correspond to the constructs within the ladders. An implication matrix generally displays two different types of implications: direct implications relate to case where one attribute/consequence is referred to by the respondent directly after another attribute/consequence in the same ladder (i.e. without any intervening constructs). Indirect implications are two attributes/consequences in the same ladder which are separated by at least one intervening attribute/consequence. This matrix acts as a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative elements of the laddering technique by showing the frequencies with which one code (construct) leads to another (Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2002). All identified constructs can be found in the appendix (tables A1-A3).

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Insert Table 2 about here
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Finally, in the third stage, we generated a Hierarchical Value Map that consists of nodes representing the most important attributes/consequences/values, and of lines indicating links between concepts (Claeys et al. 1995). Such a HVM normally consists of three different levels relating to the three *concepts of meaning*: attributes, consequences, and values. Frequently, the lower section of the map is crowded and cluttered due to the normally large number of attributes obtained during laddering (Gengler et al. 1995). Therefore, avoiding several crossing lines (i.e. overlapping ladders) is important in enabling easier interpretability of the HVM.

In our analysis, associations between constructs are cut off at level 3, meaning that linkages had to be mentioned by at least three respondents to be represented in the HVM. Higher cut-off points increase the interpretability of the map but result in information loss. The cutoff level of three was chosen as the resulting map keeps the balance between data reduction and retention (Gengler et al. 1995), and between detail and interpretability (Christensen & Olson 2002).

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**Results and Discussion**

Using our forty-four questionnaires, we identify eleven attribute constructs of expected complaint resolution management in close business relationships which are above the cutoff level. The dominant constructs are Take Quick Action[1] and Understand Problem, i.e. they are relating to the cause of the problem that had initiated the buying company to complain originally, as well as to the quick resolution of the situation (see Figure 1). However, several other 'soft' attributes which are not directly problem-related can be identified: Empathy, Active Listening, Manners, and Openness. These represent more general attributes which are linked to the relationship atmosphere in which long-term business interactions take place (McNally & Griffin 2007). This suggests that business customers want the closeness of the general business relationships (and consequently the trust and commitment-based interactions), being replicated in the specific situation of a complaint management resolution by the supplier (Håkansson & Ford 2002; Morgan & Hunt 1994). Noteworthy is that Trust is not mentioned often in this context (n = 4) which may be due to the fact that it does not specifically address complaint resolution issues.

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Insert Figure 1 about here
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The next step on the ladder, i.e. the consequences, are represented by fourteen categories. Not surprisingly, of pivotal importance for the respondents is that complaint management results in a 'Solution', i.e. a resolution of the problem causing the complaint. This is in line with other studies in this area (Trawick & Swan 1981). Three quarters of all respondents mention this issue. Another aspect of importance is the Financial Benefits that cover aspects of counteracting possible economic problems associated with the cause of the complaint (for example, the non-delivery of raw materials could cause a manufacturing production line to shut down with resulting financial losses), as well as aspects of remedial payments by the supplier. Besides these consequences, some process issues also exhibit a large degree of perceived importance by the buying company: Effective Resolution

[1] Construct names are capitalized in the text to aid better readability.

Handling, and Taking Problem Seriously both show the customer that the supplier is not only committed to dealing with a complaint situation (intention) but is also able to address it (results-oriented action).

On the value level of the means-end ladder, customer companies identify four different constructs which need to be seen as the overarching principles as to why complaint resolution management in close business relationships is of importance to them: Maintain Supplier Relationship, Maintain Customer Relationship, Network Effects, and Reputation. The small number of constructs on the highest level of abstraction is in line with results from other comparable laddering studies (Botschen & Hemetsberger 1998).

The value constructs that our study reveal exemplify the inherent interdependence that is evident in close relationships with suppliers. In fact, the most dominant value that respondents mention is Maintaining Supplier Relationships. With successful complaint resolution, customer companies see the benefits which are embedded in close relationships with strategically important suppliers, and which are jeopardized by complaint situations. However, it is noteworthy that this is also mirrored in a concern for down-stream exchanges as part of value-creating systems: Maintain Customer Relationship as another identified value relates to the fact that threats to supplier relationships also have effects for the buying company's own customers. Without good and close supplier relationships, other exchange partners (and ultimately final customers) cannot be satisfied as the necessary resource ties and pooled capabilities may be missing (Andersen et al. 1994; Evans & Berman 2001; Stabell & Fjeldstad 1998). This issue is also prevalent in the construct Network Effects that integrates the relevance of customer as well as supplier relationships within the overarching framework of the business network (Möller & Halinen 1999). The value of Reputation Benefits has relevance in this context as well: it relates to the perceived network position which the buying company (and its close relationship with key suppliers) has *vis-à-vis* other actors in the value-

creating system, and therefore indicates its relative power position (Ford et al. 2003; Ulaga & Eggert 2006).

The relationship strength between the different constructs and means-end levels in Figure 1 allows for a tentative discussion regarding the drivers (or attributes) of specific complaint management benefits (or values). The issue of being able to come up with a complaint resolution (a Solution) is clearly the central concept of the HVM. Attributes that are main drivers of this perceived beneficial consequence are Take Quick Actions and Understand Problem. In turn, a Solution results in Save Time, Managerial Benefits, and the Prevention of Future Problems. This last consequence, together with Customer Satisfaction, enables stable down-stream relationships in terms of Maintaining Customer Relationships. The value of Maintaining Supplier Relationships on the other hand is most notably based on Financial Benefits, i.e. it hints at the dominant economic logic for investing in close supplier relationships. Effective Resolution Handling is the main means to achieving this.

The main expected drivers of competent complaint management (i.e. the dominant paths in the HVM) are based on a seller Understanding the Problem (which in itself is seen by complainants to be indicated by Active Listening behaviour) and Taking Quick Action. Both impact strongly on finding a Solution to the underlying problem, a consequence which in turn results in Managerial Benefits and Saving Time for the seller, but also in the Prevention of Future Problems which is important for the buyer to Maintain Customer Relationships. Another dominant aspect of the HMV, related to finding a Solution, is a perceived Effective Solution Handling with direct Financial Benefits and consequently an ability to Maintain Supplier Relationships.

In summary, the HVM for buying companies regarding complaint resolution management shows a high degree of complexity and interdependence, especially on the consequence level. As such, the HVM can also be understood as a symmetrical interaction map with Solution as the key concept within a network of constructs (van Rekom & Wierenga 2007). This illustrates that the identified

expected means of complaint resolution management are important in a manifold way. However, the ends clearly show that the buying company has a systemic business orientation in mind, whereby a business network perspective is employed when assessing specific activities such as the complaint management capabilities of their suppliers.

To understand if the characteristics of the complaining company have any effect on their expectations regarding complaint management attributes, consequences, and values, further analyses were done. We specifically juxtaposed smaller buying companies (below 500 employees) with larger ones (500 or more employees) to assess the impact of issues of relative power in the close business relationship (Ford et al. 2003). Again the same analysis and cut-off procedure for construct inclusion was used.

Smaller companies exhibit less complex expectations regarding complaint management than larger companies. The number of constructs involved is lower, and the HVM is dominated by one critical path. While the Solution consequence is still the central construct, it is predominantly linked to the specific complaint management attribute Take Action. Via the intermediate consequence of Save Time, it is of value because it allows for Maintaining Supplier Relationships. However, for larger companies the HMV is much more complex, and several more constructs are placed in the centre without a clear critical path. Solution, Prevention of Future Problems, Financial Benefits, and Effective Solution Handling are all important consequences for these companies, linked to sellers Taking Quick Action, Openness, and Understanding the Problem. Large companies see the value of complaint management in a broader way compared to small companies; besides Maintaining Supplier Relationships they are also concerned with the impact on their own customers and the crucial relationships with them. These analyses show that larger companies perceive complaints and their handling against a wider range of managerial consequences and values, and are concerned with more aspects of the complaint management process compared to smaller companies.

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Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here
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Overall, our research yielded a well developed and complex ladder structure regarding the expectations of complaint management (see tables 3 and 4). We found a relatively high number of concepts which can be classified as consequences (fifty-two per cent) compared to values (sixteen per cent) which is mainly due to the design of the online questionnaire version of our laddering study: it seems as if respondents were not always able to completely climb to the level of values on the ladder of abstraction without the presence of interviewers. Thus, they substituted consequences for values. In face-to-face laddering studies, interviewers can employ several laddering techniques (e.g. Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) to help respondents reach the value level. These techniques were not available in our online questionnaire version and may need to be tested as part of further research.

Overall, we were able to construct a total of 191 individual ladders out of the data, and the forty-four respondents provided between one and thirteen ladders each, with an average of 4.3 ladders per respondent. The longest ladder consisted of seven concepts of meaning (attributes, consequences, and values) and the shortest two, with an average of 4.9 concepts of meaning per ladder. These results are a clear indicator that the established laddering interviewing technique can be replicated successfully in an online environment. By comparison, Voss et al. (2007), using the traditional paper and pencil version of laddering, collected fewer ladders (170) with fewer concepts of meaning (582) from more respondents (53). Furthermore, our respondents provided on average fewer ladders (3.2) that were also on average shorter (3.4). We can therefore tentatively posit the robustness of an online laddering design.

**Conclusion, Managerial Implications, and Future Research Issues**

Our study is the first application of a means-end and laddering approach (in an online hard laddering version) to the area of understanding business-to-business complaint management. Besides this

methodological contribution, our analysis and findings also enrich the existing limited stock of knowledge on complaint management in business relationships by developing a deeper understanding of the supplier attributes (i.e. characteristics and behaviours) that complaining customer companies desire, as well as the underlying business logic (i.e. values) for these expectations.

Our exploratory analysis shows that companies relate issues of complaint resolution by their key suppliers to the context of the overall business network in which they are embedded. As such, the complaint management activities of supplying companies, which are often disruptive to close business relationships, are seen as impacting on other relationships, even indirect ones involving down-stream customers. Having appropriate complaint management practices in place does not just benefit the relationship with the direct customer, but also with other network organizations. Issues of effective complaint management therefore need to be addressed not just as isolated managerial activities with limited benefits for the parties involved, but should be seen as being part of a wider activity set of strategic networking activities with impact on whole business systems (Ford et al. 2003; Ritter 1999). Such a perspective would also include the reverse understanding of how suppliers complain to their customers in close business relationships. Our research indicated that this concern with network effects is more pronounced for larger companies compared to smaller ones.

As exemplified through our laddering analysis, achieving a Solution to a complaint incident is of pivotal importance for maintaining (and maybe even enhancing) direct but also indirect supplier and customer relationships. For this purpose, our analysis pinpoints the importance of being able to clearly and quickly analyze and address the problem causing the complaint, but also to do this in a manner that is in line with and appropriate for close business relationships. The importance of Empathy, Manners, Honesty, and Openness in our analysis shows the ‘soft’ aspects of effective complaint management that arguably cannot be part of a rules-based approach. Thus, a Solution is not just about remedying the situation (outcome) but includes the way in which this is done

(process). This finding backs the importance of front-line managers for the complaint management process (Perrien et al. 1995). However, it also qualifies the distinction of a mechanistic versus an organic complaint management approach as suggested by Homburg and Fürst (2005).

As part of the analysis of business relationships, our study needs to be seen as contributing to an understanding of the interaction patterns between companies that are linked by close and interdependent ties. Therefore, concepts such as relationship atmosphere and quality represent characteristics of business relationships that need to be linked to our findings. Clearly, the managerial process of resolving complaints is only one side of working together in a close relationship. The social signals embedded in interactions aimed at resolving complaint situations are another important attribute which needs to be managed in order to maintain or enhance relationships. As such, complaint management in business marketing merits inclusion in the more general study of tie characteristics, relationship-specific investments, and strategic networking activities.

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**Table 1: Overview of business complaint behaviour/management literature**

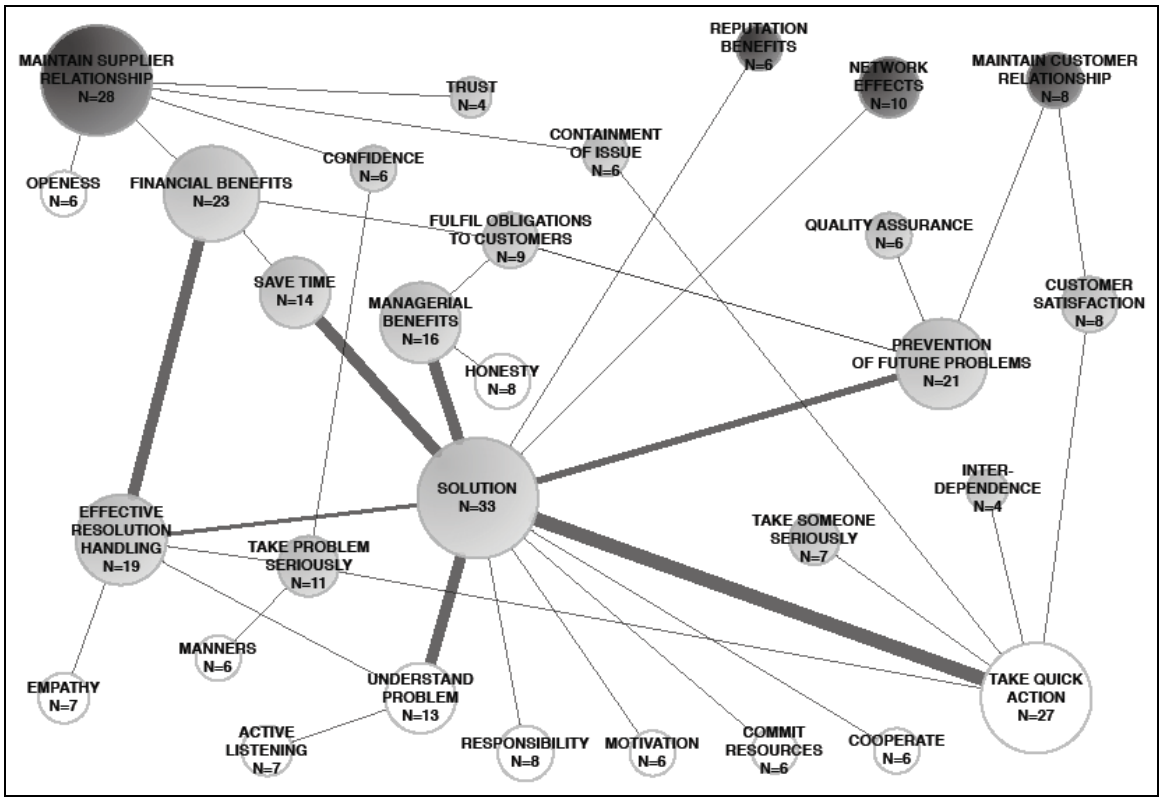
| *Source* | *Business complaint emphasis* | *Method* | *Findings* |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Williams & Rao (1980)** | • buyer complaining behaviour | • conceptual | • developed a model consisting of antecedents influencing complaint behaviour |
| **Trawick & Swan (1981)** | • industrial satisfaction/complaining behaviour | • Quantitative, mail survey (n = 90) | • developed a model of the purchaser's satisfaction with supplier response to a formal buyer complaint |
| **Dart & Freeman (1994)** | • examined the response style of unsatisfied business clients | • Quantitative, mail survey<br>• Factor, cluster and discrimination analysis | • 4 types of complaint behaviour |
| **Perrien et al. (1995)** | • attempted to understand the dissolution of business relationship | • Qualitative (n = 50)<br>• NGT | • account manager/front line people account for 30% of the dissolution reason (responsible for poor complaint resolution and satisfaction among other issues), secondary data |
| **Hicks et al. (1996)** | • dissatisfaction response styles<br>• conceptualized friendly complaints (instead of exit or involving third parties) | • Quantitative, survey (n = 162)<br>• Qualitative, in-depth interviews (n = 20)<br>• Cluster analysis | • four dissatisfaction response styles<br>• suggests actions to reduce customer dissatisfaction complaints |
| **Hansen et al. (1996)** | • attempted to understand the industrial complaining process and positive vs. negative complaints | • Quantitative, survey (n = 162)<br>• Qualitative, in-depth interviews (n = 20)<br>• chi-squares and t-tests | • analyzed the perceived effectiveness of marketer responses to complaints |
| **Hansen et al. (1997a)** | • industrial complaints | • conceptual meta-study of customer complaint behaviour literature | • developed a model of industrial complaints |
| **Hansen et al. (1997b)** | • same as above | • same as above | • identified a set of variables useful for predicting styles of buyer complaint behaviour |
| **Hansen (1997)** | • showed power as a predictor of industrial complaining styles | • Quant, survey (n = 162) | • referent and punishment power play a major role in predicting of complaining styles |
| **Homburg & Fürst (2005)** | • addressed how organizational complaint handling drives customer loyalty | • Quant, survey (n = 110 dyads)<br>• combined B2B/B2C survey | • mechanistic approach has a stronger total impact than organic approach<br>• effects of the mechanic approach are stronger in B2C than in B2B and in service than in manufacturing firms |

**Table 2: Implication matrix example**

| | Effective Resolution Handling | Prevention of Future Problems | Managerial Benefits | Take Problem Seriously | Save Time | Fulfill Obligations to our Customers | Confidence | Quality Assurance | Take Someone Seriously | Customer Satisfaction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Take Quick Action | 5/5 | 1/4 | 3/6 | 4/4 | 2/7 | 2/6 | /1 | /2 | 1/4 | /3 |
| Understand Problem | 3/3 | 4/8 | | | 1/1 | /2 | | 1/2 | 2/2 | |
| Honesty | 1/1 | /1 | 1/3 | 1/1 | | | /2 | | | |
| Motivation | 1/1 | 1/1 | 1/1 | /1 | /1 | /1 | /1 | | | 1/1 |
| Responsibility | 1/2 | /1 | 1/1 | 1/1 | 1/2 | | | /1 | 1/1 | /1 |
| Openness | 1/2 | 1/2 | /2 | | | | 1/1 | | | |
| Manners | 1/3 | | | 3/3 | | | | | /1 | |
| Empathy | 1/4 | /1 | | 2/2 | | /1 | | | /1 | /1 |
| Active Listening | 1/2 | | | 1/1 | | /1 | | /1 | 1/1 | /1 |
| Commit Resources | | | /1 | /1 | 1/1 | | 1/1 | | 1/1 | /2 |
| Cooperate | 1/1 | /2 | 1/2 | | | /1 | | | | |
| Solution | | 7/7 | 4/5 | 1/1 | 6/7 | 2/4 | 1/1 | 1/3 | 1/1 | 2/2 |
| Financial Benefits | | | | | | | | | | 1/1 |
| Effective Resolution Handling | | 2/4 | /1 | 1/1 | /1 | /1 | 1/2 | /2 | /1 | 2/2 |
| Prevention of Future Problems | | | 1/1 | | | 3/3 | 1/1 | 4/4 | | 1/1 |
| Managerial Benefits | | | | | | 4//4 | | | | 1/2 |
| Take Problem Seriously | 3/3 | 1/2 | 1/1 | | | | 3/3 | 1/1 | 1/1 | |
| Save Time | | | 2/2 | | | | | | | |

**Note: The number of direct implications is given on the left of the dash; total implications (direct and indirect relations) are shown to the right of the dash. For example, "Take Quick Action" leads to "Save Time" twice directly and 5 times indirectly (i.e. total minus direct implications). Thus, 2 respondents said that the supplier's ability to take quick action directly helps buying companies to save time, whereas 5 respondents sequentially related the two elements with another element in between.**

**Figure 1: Hierarchical value map of all respondents**




**Note: Attributes=white, consequences=grey and values=black; numbers (N) refer to frequency with which constructs were mentioned; the thickness of the lines linking constructs indicates the tie strength between them**

**Table 3: Number of attributes, consequences, and values**

| Attributes | | Consequences | | Values | | Sum of Concepts |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Number of attributes* | *Number of times mentioned in ladders* Total (% of sum of concepts) | *Number of consequences* | *Number of times mentioned in ladders* Total (% of sum of concepts) | *Number of Values* | *Number of times mentioned in ladders* Total (% of sum of concepts) | |
| 28 | 216 (32%) | 28 | 343 (52%) | 6 | 106 (16%) | 665 |

Note: the numbers refer to overall identified concepts. Due to our cutoff levels for inclusion in further analyses, they do not correspond with the numbers presented in the HVM.

**Table 4: Number and length of ladders**

| *Number of ladders* | *Number of ladders per respondent* | | | *Number of concepts of meaning* (A/C/V) | *Number of concepts of meaning per ladder* (i.e. Length of ladder) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Min | Max | Average | | Min | Max | Average |
| 191 | 1 | 13 | 4.3 | 665 | 2 | 7 | 4.9 |

Note: A/C/V = attributes/consequences/values

## Appendix

**Note for tables A1-A3: The constructs appear in alphabetical order; n refers to the frequency with which this construct was mentioned; concepts that appear later in the HVM (based on the construct association cut-off) are shaded.**

### Table A1: Overview list of attributes

| | |
|---|---|
| Accuracy | n= 1 |
| Acknowledgement of Problem | n=10 |
| Active Listening | n= 8 |
| Authority | n= 1 |
| Commit Resources | n= 7 |
| Communicate | n= 3 |
| Competence | n= 3 |
| Constructiveness | n= 3 |
| Cooperate | n= 7 |
| Empathy | n= 9 |
| Feedback | n= 8 |
| Flexibility | n= 3 |
| Good with Administration | n= 1 |
| Helpfulness | n= 2 |
| Honesty | n=14 |
| Intelligence | n= 1 |
| Manners | n= 9 |
| Motivation | n=11 |
| Openness | n=11 |
| Prevention Methods and Controls | n= 2 |
| Proactiveness | n= 6 |
| Reliability | n= 5 |
| Responsibility | n=11 |
| Supportiveness | n= 1 |
| Take Quick Action | n=49 |
| Transparency | n= 4 |
| Trustworthiness | n= 3 |
| Understand Problem | n=23 |

## Table A2: Overview list of consequences

| | |
|---|---|
| Avoid Complaints | n= 2 |
| Certainty | n= 1 |
| Commitment | n= 4 |
| Concentrate on Other Issues | n= 4 |
| Competitive Advantage | n= 6 |
| Confidence | n=16 |
| Containment of Issue | n= 8 |
| Credibility | n= 1 |
| Customer Satisfaction | n=10 |
| Differentiation | n= 2 |
| Effective Resolution Handling | n=35 |
| Financial Benefits | n=39 |
| Fulfil Obligations to our Customers | n=16 |
| Good Working Environment | n= 8 |
| Interdependence | n= 6 |
| Learning | n= 3 |
| Legal Responsibility | n= 1 |
| Loyalty | n= 1 |
| Managerial Benefits | n=23 |
| Pass on Steam | n= 1 |
| Prevention of Future Problems | n=28 |
| Quality Assurance | n=13 |
| Reduction of System Rigidity | n= 1 |
| Save Time | n=16 |
| Solution | n=64 |
| Take Problem Seriously | n=17 |
| Take Someone Seriously | n=10 |
| Trust | n= 7 |

## Table A3: Overview list of values

| | |
|---|---|
| Fairness | n= 1 |
| Maintain Customer Relationship | n=12 |
| Maintain Supplier Relationship | n=61 |
| Network Effects | n=17 |
| Reputation Benefits | n=10 |
| Well Being | n= 5 |