

Customer satisfaction lies somewhere between pleasure and pain

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A new study suggests that it depends on whether you tend to seek pleasure or avoid pain. Credit: University of Alberta

Edmonton) A new paper by Kyle Murray, a marketing researcher with the Alberta School of Business, puts a spin on the expression "you can't please everyone."

Murray and co-authors Remi Trudel of Boston University and June Cotte from the University of Western Ontario found that when it comes to our basic consumer motivations, how we experience a good or bad service experience or how we react to a superior or inferior product depends on whether we're prone to seeking pleasure or avoiding pain. This translates into two groups who show very different levels of satisfaction for the same consumer experience.

The pleasure-versus-pain principle

The researchers studied people's reactions to two consumer experiences: tasting a cup of coffee and choosing a digital camera. In both studies, there was a quality product and one that had been altered to affect its quality. Test subjects were asked to rate their satisfaction with the product's quality. The researchers discovered that respondents fell into two categories: promotion-focused (pleasure-seeking) or prevention-focused (pain-avoiding). "These two types of people respond very differently to having the same kind of service encounter or having the same kind of problem with a product," said Murray.

"People who are promotion-focused tend to get a lot more hurt when something goes wrong, but they're also a lot happier when something goes right," he said. "The prevention-focused people are less upset when something goes wrong—when they buy a product and it breaks or they have a bad service experience—but they're also less happy when something goes right."

Can't get no satisfaction? It may be a conservative bias

Murray notes that although the prevention-focused response was far less extreme than the promotion-focused response, the pain-avoiding group appeared less able to enjoy a positive consumer experience. As a consequence, their controlled reactions left them feeling less joy when something went right—a phenomenon the researchers labelled a conservative bias.

"That conservative bias changes the way they see the world," he said. "They're a little bit more constrained in all their responses, at least in the realm of satisfaction."

Get to know consumer audiences

Prior research suggests that there is segmentation across both gender and age lines. Specifically, previous work indicates that women and older adults are slightly more chronically prevention-focused, whereas men and younger people tend to be more promotion-focused. Murray says that changing our consumer characteristics may not be an option, but being able to understand how the other side responds certainly is. For the customer service world, this means helping staff to understand both groups, and preparing them for the reality that when it comes to complaints, one style does not fit all.

"To some extent, they can tell front-line people that, as older people approach them, they're going to be more prevention-focused, they're not going to be as extreme either way," said Murray. "But when something has gone really wrong with that 21-year-old's game console, they're going to be a lot more upset and more likely to tell their friends.

"On the flip side, when they take it home and it works well and they really enjoy it, they're more excited and happy, and more likely to tell their friends about it."

The study was published in the March 2012 issue of the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*.

Provided by University of Alberta

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