

Alleviating the negative impact of delayed recovery: process- versus outcome-focused explanations

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Abstract

Purpose – Limited research has explored the potential marketing strategies to counter the damage associated with delayed recovery. Based on the construal level theory, this study seeks to suggest that customers tend to focus on different aspects of the compensation according to the speed of recovery. Thus, providing an adequate explanation to customers corresponding to expected recovery speed can effectively alleviate customer dissatisfaction with a delayed recovery.

Design/methodology/approach – This study examined the proposed hypotheses using a 2 (immediate vs delayed) by 2 (explanation: process-focused vs outcome-focused) experimental design.

Findings – The analytical results show that when an immediate recovery is available, an outcome-focused explanation will result in higher post-failure satisfaction than will a process-focused explanation. Conversely, when a delayed recovery is expected, post-failure satisfaction is higher for customers who receive a process-focused explanation than for those who receive an outcome-focused explanation.

Practical implications – This study thus recommends that firms should provide explanations compatible with expected recovery speed to better enhance post-failure satisfaction.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the body of service recovery literature by examining the differential effectiveness of outcome-focused and process-focused explanations under immediate and delayed recovery conditions. The findings provide a guideline that managers can use to formulate suitable explanations to alleviate the detrimental effects of delayed recovery.

Keywords Service failure, Construal level theory, Recovery speed

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

Service failures and failed recoveries are found to be the main causes of customer switching behavior (Keaveney, 1995). Therefore, developing effective recovery strategies to maintain customer loyalty has become a focus for both practitioners and researchers (Stauss and Friege, 1999). The accumulation of research demonstrates that procedural justice is an important determinant of customer satisfaction with service recovery (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997; Tax *et al.*, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Schoefer and Ennew, 2005). In the past literature, speed of recovery is one of the most frequently used factors to represent procedural justice (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997; Tax *et al.*, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Wirtz and Mattila, 2004). Compared to a delayed response, researchers have ascertained that customers perceive greater procedural

justice following timely feedback to service failure, and therefore feel more satisfied with the provided recovery (Kim and Ulgado, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Wirtz and Mattila, 2004). Accordingly, most scholars suggest that firms should provide immediate recovery to customers after a service failure (Kim and Ulgado, 2012; Tax *et al.*, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999). However, not all service problems are quickly solvable. If service providers are unable to implement immediate recovery actions, customers might perceive lower procedural justice and negatively impacting customer responses.

Although previous studies have widely recognized the detrimental effects of delayed recovery, to our knowledge, no prior research has been conducted to explore possible solutions to alleviate unfavorable consequences when an immediate service recovery is unavailable. This study aims to fill this research gap by examining the interactive impact between explanation type and recovery speed on post-failure satisfaction. Based on construal level theory, this current work maintains that providing customers with explanations could alleviate customer dissatisfaction with a delayed response to service failure. Additionally, it is suggested the effectiveness of explanations with different foci (process-focused or outcome-

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Journal of Services Marketing
27/7 (2013) 564–571
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited [ISSN 0887-6045]
[DOI 10.1108/JSM-06-2012-0097]

Both authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Received 2 June 2012
Revised 2 June 2012
Accepted 20 August 2012

focused) varies according to recovery speed (immediate or delayed). Based on the findings, this study attempts to offer a potential means for managers to reduce the negative impact of delayed recovery.

In the following, section two reviews the germane literature and formulates hypotheses. Subsequently, section three illustrates the research design and procedures. Section four then presents the research results and tests the formulated hypotheses. Finally, section five discusses the managerial implications and limitations of the study.

Literature review and research hypotheses

Recovery speed

In the service recovery context, procedural justice is defined as the perception of the fairness of specific policies and/or procedures adopted by service providers in the recovery process (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002). Previous studies use “recovery speed” to represent procedural justice in service recovery (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997; Tax *et al.*, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Wirtz and Mattila, 2004). Empirically, existing studies ascertain that rapid recovery fosters customer perceptions of procedural justice and thus eventually enhance customer satisfaction (Kim and Ulgado, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 1999) reduces complaint behaviors (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997) and enhance repatronage intentions (Kim and Ulgado, 2012). Additionally, Wirtz and Mattila (2004) show that customers consider a fast recovery to indicate efficient service, and thus tend to attribute the cause of the service failure as being instability. Therefore, prompting an on-the-spot response is essential to effective service recovery (Kim and Ulgado, 2012; Tax *et al.*, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999). Unfortunately, not all service failures can be promptly and effectively recovered from a short amount of time, and delayed reactions can negatively impact service providers (Hart *et al.*, 1990; DeWitt and Brady, 2003). However, a limited number of studies have addressed how firms can reduce customer dissatisfaction with delayed recovery when a speedy recovery is unavailable or impossible.

Past research suggests that appropriate explanations can reduce consumers’ sense of injustice and emotional reaction after a service failure (Bradley and Sparks, 2012; Bies, 1987; Greenberg, 1990; Conlon and Murray, 1996; Wang and Mattila, 2011). Accordingly, this study proposes that when an immediate response to a service failure is not executable, providing explanations to customers can increase customer perceptions of procedural justice and thus alleviate customer dissatisfaction regarding the delayed response. Additionally, the current study further distinguishes between two types of explanations: process-focused explanation, which emphasizes the step-by-step procedures for the service recovery, and outcome-focused explanation, which motivates customers to think about the desirable outcome of a service recovery. In order to build a theory to illustrate the different impacts of process-focus and outcome-focus explanations on post-failure satisfaction, the current work incorporate the “construal level theory” into the framework.

Construal level theory

Construal level theory proposes that people construct different representations of the same events depending on whether they pertain to the near or distant future (Trope and Liberman, 2000; Liberman *et al.*, 2002; Trope and Liberman,

2003; Trope *et al.*, 2007). This theory suggests that temporal distance changes individual responses to future events by changing mental representations of those events. Specifically, people tend to focus on high-level construals aspects of distant-future events and low-level construals of near-future events. High-level construals are relatively simple and coherent representations which generally consisted of abstract, superordinate, goal-relevant, desirability-related, and “why” aspects of options (Trope and Liberman, 2000; Liberman *et al.*, 2002; Trope and Liberman, 2003; Trope *et al.*, 2007). In contrast, low-level construals tend to be represented in terms of concrete, subordinate, goal-irrelevant, feasibility-related, and “how” features of options. Forster *et al.* (2004) offer the following example to illustrate this phenomenon: a person thinking about a conference a year from now might think about it in terms of more superordinate goals, such as “learning about new research,” whereas a person thinking about a conference that takes place tomorrow might be construing it in terms of more subordinate and concrete goals, such as “ironing one’s pants (Forster *et al.*, 2004, p. 177).” By systematically changing the mental representation of these events, people can exhibit time-inconsistent preferences regarding the same options (Trope and Liberman, 2000; Liberman and Trope, 1998). For instance, Trope and Liberman (2000) demonstrate that the preference for an interesting job with uninteresting training over an uninteresting job with interesting training is more pronounced in the distant future than in the near future.

Because individuals tend to focus on different aspects in response to shifts in temporal distance, prior studies suggest that people are more likely to pay attention to messages highlighting features matching their mental representation (Fujita *et al.*, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2009). For example, Fujita *et al.* (2008) find that arguments highlighting goal-relevant and desirability-related, and general features are more persuasive than those appealing to goal-irrelevant, feasibility-related, and specific features when attitude objects are in distant vs near future. Kim *et al.* (2009) also show that abstract, “why”-laden appeals are more persuasive than concrete, “how”-laden appeals when the election campaign is expected to begin in the distant future than in near future. Accordingly, some scholars propose that prompting customers to think about certain aspect (high-level or low-level) could exert different influences on attitudes towards near or distant future events. For instance, Zhao *et al.* (2007) posit that for events in the near future, low level (concrete) construal representations are naturally more noticeable and high-level (abstract) construal representations are neglected. Thus, the outcome-focused simulation which activates the high-level (abstract) representations could result in larger shifts in preferences than could process-focused simulation in a near-future setting. In contrast, high-level (abstract) construal representations are more frequently evoked and low-level (concrete) construal representations are naturally neglected for events in the distant future. Therefore, compared with outcome-focused simulation, process-focused simulation which highlights low-level (concrete) representations can change preferences more for distant-future events.

Recovery speed and type of explanations

Based on the construal level theory, this study proposes that the impacts of explanations (process-focused versus outcome-

focused) on post-failure satisfaction is likely to be contingent upon the speed of recovery (immediate versus delayed). When an immediate (near future) recovery is available, customers tend to focus on the concrete aspects and neglect the abstract aspects of service recovery. Customers thus may focus their attention more on the process and speed of recovery, while being less aware of the attractiveness/fairness of the compensation. Under such a condition, an outcome-focused explanation which aims to activate the benefit considerations of the recovery is more likely to enhance post-failure satisfaction than a process-focused explanation. Conversely, when a delayed (distant future) recovery is anticipated, abstract aspects are more likely to be evoked than concrete aspects of service recovery. In this circumstance, customers may overlook the benefits of compensation while recognize less the detailed process needed to achieve the recovery. Therefore, compared with an outcome-focused explanation, a process-focused explanation that allows customers to realize the step-by-step procedural of formulating the recovery seems more effective in reducing perceived injustice and increasing post-failure satisfaction with the delayed recovery.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1.* When an immediate recovery is expected, an outcome-focused explanation will lead to higher post-failure satisfaction than a process-focused explanation.
- H2.* When a delayed recovery is expected, a process-focused explanation will lead to higher post-failure satisfaction than an outcome-focused explanation.

Research methodology

To examine the proposed framework, two experiment designs are conducted. In order to enhance the generalizability and applicability of research findings, two service categories, computer-repair (study 1) and motorcycle maintenance (study 2), are selected to design research scenarios. These two services categories are chosen because the university students are heavy users for computer-repair and motorcycle maintenance services in Taiwan. University students are chosen because they are more homogeneous than other population in order to minimize the effects of extraneous factors and are easier to be accessed.

Participants

For study 1, 240 students from two major universities in Northern Taiwan were recruited to participate in this experiment. A total of 86 percent of the participants are college students and the remaining 14 percent of those are graduate school students. Regarding the sample demographics, 60 percent of the participants were full-time students and 40 percent were part-time students. Moreover, a little over half of the sample (53 percent) was male. Furthermore, 35 percent of participants were under 20 years old, 30 percent were 20–25 years old, 21 percent were 26–30 years old, and 14 percent were above 30 years old. After completing the questionnaires, all participants received a small gift in recognition of their effort.

In study 2, 100 university students from a university in Southern Taiwan enrolled in marketing courses participated in the study in exchange for course credit. All of the participants are full-time students. Additionally, 30 percent of

the participants were male and 70 percent of those were female. Moreover, all of the participants were aged between 20 to 25 years old.

Experiment design

To test the hypotheses, study 1 and study 2 both employed a 2 (recovery speed: immediate vs delayed) by 2 (type of explanation: outcome-focused vs process-focused) between-subject experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. The questionnaire used in the current study was written in Chinese.

In study 1, participants first read a scenario depicting a service failure involving a computer repair center. The scenario described a service encounter in which a computer repair job is completed on schedule, but the customer finds an originally functioning hardware device of the computer has been accidentally damaged by the repairman. The repairman took 15 minutes to fix this problem in the immediate recovery scenario, whereas the customer had to wait three more days for the computer to be fixed in the delayed recovery scenario. These manipulations were tested for their ability for the effect on recovery speed perceptions. In the outcome-focused explanation condition, customers were told the repairman would fix the damaged device, and the benefits of this outcome were emphasized. In the process-focused explanation condition, customers were informed that the repair center had to transfer the components from other stores, meaning the repair would take some time. After reading the scenario, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their post-failure satisfaction. Finally, participants answered the manipulation check items and demographic questions.

Similar procedures as study 1 were implemented for study 2. The scenario in study 2 described the customer found the motorcycle is unable to start after a routine maintenance check. The engineer took 15 minutes to fix this problem in the immediate recovery scenario, whereas the customer had to wait two more hours for the recovery in the delayed recovery scenario. The effectiveness of these manipulations was also confirmed by a focus group interview with the university students. In the outcome-focused explanation condition, the customer was told his/her motorcycle will be as good as new after repair. In the process-focused explanation condition, the customer was explained about the repair procedures of the motorcycle.

Measures

All multiple-item scales in this study were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, with anchors ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Items were adopted from existing scales, but modifications were made where necessary to suit the specifics of the scenario. The Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) scale for customer satisfaction with service recovery is adapted with minor modification to fit the current context. The three items on the scale included: “The service provided by the service provider was satisfactory”, “Deciding to go to this service provider was a poor decision” and “I am satisfied with the service provided.” A two-item scale, modified from Wirtz and Mattila (2004), was used to measure subject perceptions of recovery speed. The two items are: “The service provider performs recovery quickly,” and “The service recovery takes longer than necessary.” On the

other hand, the manipulation on type of explanation was checked by asking participants to rate two items regarding whether the explanations focus on outcome and another four items measuring whether they focus on process. The item is: "The explanation provided by the service provider focuses on the outcome (process) of the recovery." To confirm that the scenarios are realistic, one item was used to assess subject perceptions of realism. This item is "this story reflects what might happen in the real world." All items were translated into Chinese by one of the author who received PhD degree in US and reviewed by two experts major in service marketing.

Results

Manipulation and realism checks

The mean scores of experimental subjects for the recovery speed manipulation checks differ significantly between the immediate recovery and delayed recovery groups for both study 1 (5.4 versus 4.0, $t_{118} = 9.2$, $p = 0.00$) and study 2 (4.0 versus 3.5, $t_{98} = 2.1$, $p = 0.04$). The reliabilities of the three scales employed for the manipulation checks of recovery speed is 0.76 for study 1, and 0.70 for study 2, within an acceptable range. Additionally, participants who were assigned to the outcome-focused explanation group reported significantly higher scores for the item measuring whether the explanation is focused on outcome than those assigned to the process-focused explanation group (study 1: 4.8 versus 3.2, $t_{118} = 11.1$, $p = 0.00$; study 2: 4.3 versus 3.4, $t_{98} = 3.3$, $p = 0.00$). Conversely, participants exposed to the process-focused explanation condition rated significantly higher than those exposed to the outcome-focused explanation condition (study 1: 5.3 versus 3.5, $t_{118} = 1.8$, $p = 0.04$; study 2: 4.2 versus 3.6, $t_{98} = 2.3$, $p = 0.03$) in the item concerning whether the explanation is focused on process. These results indicate that the manipulations performed in this study are effective. Finally, the reality score is 5.9 for study 1 and 5.8 for study 2, and thus significantly exceeds 4 (study 1: $t_{239} = 29.9$, $p = 0.00$; Study 2: $t_{99} = 16.8$, $p = 0.00$). This result reveals that participants apparently perceive the scenarios to be realistic.

Tests of hypotheses

To test the proposed research hypotheses, the data are analyzed by using ANOVA. Recovery speed (immediate vs delay) and type of explanation (outcome-focused vs process-focused) are designed as between subject factors, and the dependent variable is post-failure satisfaction. The internal consistency of the post-failure satisfaction measure has a satisfactory Cronbach alpha (study 1: 0.83; study 2: 0.70). No significant difference on post-failure evaluation is found between gender, education degree, and university. Table I summarizes the ANOVA results of Study 1 and Table II summarizes the ANOVA results of study 2.

The ANOVA results reveal significant interaction effect between explanation type and expected recovery speed on post-failure satisfaction ($F_{1,232} = 27.72$, $p < 0.001$), indicating the effect of explanation on post-failure satisfaction is contingent on the recovery speed. *H1* posits that post-failure satisfaction will be higher for customers who received an outcome-focused explanation than for those who received a process-focused explanation under the immediate recovery condition. Figure 1 depicts the interaction effect between type of explanation and recovery speed on post-

Table I Summary of ANOVA on post-failure satisfaction (study 1)

Source	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Intercept	4512.446	1	4512.446	3189.11	0.000
RS	30.341	1	30.341	21.44	0.000
ToE	6.017	1	6.017	4.25	0.040
RS × ToE	35.267	1	35.267	24.92	0.000
Error	333.930	236	1.415		
Total	4918.000	240			

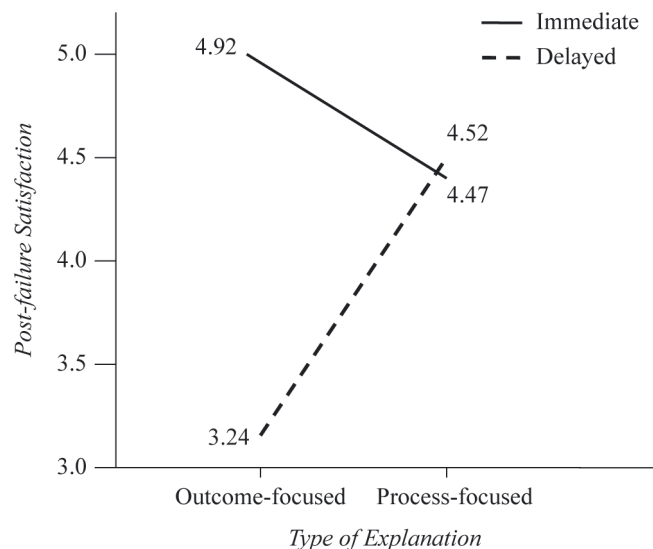
Note: Recovery speed (RS); Type of explanation (ToE)

Table II Summary of ANOVA on post-failure satisfaction (study 2)

Source	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Intercept	945.563	1	945.563	753.561	0.000
RS	3.803	1	3.803	3.030	0.085
ToE	0.902	1	0.902	0.719	0.399
RS × ToE	5.523	1	5.523	4.401	0.039
Error	120.460	96	1.255		
Total	1076.250	100			

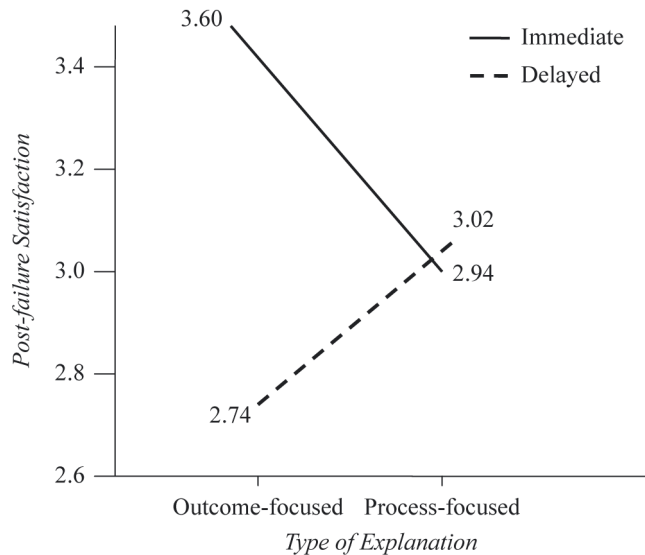
Note: Recovery speed (RS); Type of explanation (ToE)

Figure 1 The interaction between recovery speed and type of explanation (study 1)



failure satisfaction in study 1. As predicted, in the immediate recovery condition, post-failure satisfaction is significantly higher for customers who received an outcome-focused explanation ($M = 4.92$) than those who received a process-focused explanation ($M = 4.47$). In addition, Figure 2 illustrates the interaction effect between type of explanation and recovery speed on post-failure satisfaction in study 2. As is shown in Figure 2, in the immediate recovery condition, post-failure satisfaction is significantly higher for customers who received an outcome-focused explanation ($M = 3.60$)

Figure 2 The interaction between recovery speed and type of explanation (study 2)



than those who received a process-focused explanation ($M = 2.94$). Therefore, *H1* is supported.

Additionally, *H2* states that in the event of delayed recovery, a process-focused explanation will lead to higher post-failure satisfaction compared to an outcome-focused explanation. In study 1, customers are significantly more satisfied when firms provide a process-focused explanation ($M = 4.52$) than an outcome-focused explanation ($M = 3.24$) in the delayed recovery condition. Similar results are found in study 2. Post-failure satisfaction are significantly higher when firms provide a process-focused explanation ($M = 3.02$) than an outcome-focused explanation ($M = 2.74$) in the delayed recovery condition. Therefore, *H2* also receive empirical support.

Discussion

Researchers have advocated that service recovery should be delivered rapidly if possible after a failure to improve perceptions of procedural justice and customer satisfaction (Tax *et al.*, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999). However, it is difficult for firms to deliver on-the-spot reactions to all service failures. If delayed response is unavoidable, service providers may face the risk of upsetting customers due to perceptions of unfairness. Companies thus should develop effective marketing strategies to alleviate the negative impact of a delayed recovery when a speedy recovery is unavailable. To our knowledge, this is the first study attempting to provide executable actions for marketers to alleviate negative consequences due to delay recovery. It is believed that the findings of this study can provide valuable insight for both researchers and managers.

Prior research suggests that appropriate explanations can reduce negative emotions and enhance fairness perception after people experience unfavorable events (Bradley and Sparks, 2012; Bies, 1987; Greenberg, 1990; Conlon and Murray, 1996; Wang and Mattila, 2011). This study infers that provision of explanations for the delayed response would help counter the potential damage resulting from unfair

recovery procedures, such as customer dissatisfaction (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985), negative word-of-mouth (Richins, 1983), switching behavior (Keaveney, 1995) and retaliation (Grégoire and Fisher, 2008). However, to date no studies have explored how firms can provide more effective explanations to alleviate the negative consequences of delayed response when service providers cannot execute an immediate recovery. Based on the construal level theory, this study contributes to the body of service recovery literature by examining the differential effectiveness of outcome-focused and process-focused explanations under immediate and delayed recovery conditions. The findings provide a guideline that managers can use to formulate suitable explanations to alleviate the detrimental effects of delayed recovery.

Specifically, when service companies are able to deliver a speedy recovery after service failure, customers tend to pay more attention on the recovery process and neglect superiority of the recovery. In such situation, providing customers with outcome-focused explanations, rather than process-focused explanations, may lead customers to focus more on the benefits of recovery and thus increase perceived justice and hence satisfaction with the timely response. On the other hand, when firms are incapable of delivering an immediate recovery, customers naturally focus more on the desirable outcome and neglect the procedural needed for a recovery. Under such a condition, provisions of process-focused explanations can better enhance the feasibility of the future recovery and thus increase customer perceptions of fairness as well as post-failure satisfaction relative to provisions of outcome-focused explanations. These findings can help service providers offer adequate explanations compatible with recovery speed and thus more effectively improve post-failure satisfaction which has been long ignored in past literature. For example, when a car repair shop find the job cannot be completed at the promised time, the explanation provided to customer should contingent upon the expected recovery speed. If the repair shop expects the job will be delayed for relative long time, the employee should provide explanation that emphasize on why the job is delayed and the process the repair shop is going to fix the car. In contrast, if the repair shop is capable of completing the job in a short period of time, the explanation should focus on the performance of the car after the repair. The contingent explanation according to expected recovery speed can better reduce the customer dissatisfaction with the delayed job.

This study may also enhance current understanding to the notion that different messages may exert different impacts depending on the temporal distance of events. In recent studies, marketing researchers have obtained that encouraging customers to think about certain aspect (high-level or low-level) could exert different influences on attitudes towards near or distant future events (Zhao *et al.*, 2007). The present study provided further empirical evidence, but in a service-recovery context.

Managerial implications

This study concludes that when a recovery is offered immediately, an outcome-focused explanation exerts a greater impact on enhancing post-failure satisfaction than a process-focused explanation. In practical terms, this study suggests that when a quick response is available, service

providers should proactively offer customers an explanation stressing the benefits of the service recovery to activate abstract thoughts. On the contrary, in a situation where firms are unable to deliver an on-the-spot recovery, a process-focused explanation offers a more effective means of managing customer dissatisfaction with delayed response than an outcome-focused explanation. Accordingly, service providers can explain in detail how the failure is resolved and why the problem cannot be solved immediately. Those explanations are more likely to encourage process-focused thoughts that help reduce perceptions of injustice, and thus increase customer satisfaction with the recovery. Taken together, by giving adequate explanations compatible with speed of recovery, companies can improve their chances of maintaining customer satisfaction and prevent customer negative word-of-mouth and switching behavior.

Limitations and future research

The results presented in this study have several limitations. First, written scenarios are used to create the experimental conditions. Whether the conclusions of this study can be generalized to real-life situations remains uncertain and necessitates further study. Additionally, the study sample mostly comprises university students. Although university students are legitimate customers for computer-repair and motorcycle maintenance services in Taiwan, the study findings should be interpreted cautiously when generalizing to other population groups. Finally, owing to the nature of the experiment, this study includes only two type of service (computer repair and motorcycle maintenance). Although the conclusion of this study seems to be applicable to many service categories, the generalizability of the results needs further examination in future studies replicated in more service settings. Future studies may also wish to examine whether other recovery strategies, such as providing additional choices of recovery or allowing greater recovery voice, could help alleviate possible damage associated with the delayed recovery.

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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefits of the material present.

Your computer fault is fixed at the repair center, but then you discover a hardware device has been damaged during the process. What happens next can involve quite different scenarios. For instance, the repairman simply fixes the

problem in 15 minutes or you are told that a part is needed and so it will take three days for it to be repaired.

Similar situations face a motorcyclist whose bike will not start after a routine maintenance check. The immediate recovery takes a matter of minutes, while a different scenario involves a two-hour wait until an appropriate engineer becomes available.

Service failures and failed recoveries are said to be the main causes of customer switching behavior and the speed of recovery is one of the most frequently-used factors to represent what is called “procedural justice” – in other words their perception of fairness. Compared with a delayed response, customers perceive greater procedural justice following timely feedback to service failure, and therefore feel more satisfied. It is easy to say that firms should provide customers with immediate recovery after a service failure but not all service problems are quickly solvable.

It seems sensible therefore to ensure a customer is provided with an explanation about the delay as a means of alleviating dissatisfaction. However, the effectiveness of explanations with different foci (process-focused or outcome-focused) can vary according to whether the recovery speed is immediate or delayed.

In “Alleviating the negative impact of delayed recovery: process- versus outcome-focused explanations” Chia-Chi Chang and Chia-Yi Chen propose that when an immediate response to a service failure is not possible, providing explanations to customers can increase their perceptions of procedural justice and so alleviate their dissatisfaction regarding the delayed response. Additionally, the authors further distinguish between the two types of explanations: process-focused explanation, which emphasizes the step-by-step procedures for the service recovery, and outcome-focused explanation, which motivates customers to think about the desirable outcome of a service recovery.

In the motorcycle example, with the outcome-focused explanation, the customer is told that the bike will be good as new after repair. In the process-focused situation, repair procedures are explained to the motorcyclist. With the computer repair failure, in the outcome-focused explanation condition, the customer was told the repairman would fix it and the benefits of this outcome emphasized. In the process-focused explanation condition, the customer was told that the repair center had to get components from other stores and that would take some time.

When a car repair shop finds the job cannot be completed at the promised time, the explanation provided to a customer should contingent upon the expected recovery speed. If the repair shop expects the job will be delayed for a relatively long time, the employee should provide an explanation that emphasizes why the job is delayed and the process the repair shop is going to be engaged in to fix it. In contrast, if the repair shop is capable of completing the job in a short period of time, the explanation should focus on the performance of the car after the repair. The contingent explanation according to the expected recovery speed can better reduce the customer dissatisfaction with the delayed job.

The authors conclude that when a recovery is offered immediately, an outcome-focused explanation exerts a greater impact on enhancing post-failure satisfaction than a process-focused explanation. In practical terms, this suggests that when a quick response is available, service providers should proactively offer customers an explanation stressing the

benefits of the service recovery to activate abstract thoughts. On the contrary, in a situation where firms are unable to deliver on-the-spot recovery, a process-focused explanation offers a more effective means of managing customer dissatisfaction with delayed response than an outcome-focused explanation.

Accordingly, service providers can explain in detail how the failure is resolved and why the problem cannot be solved immediately. Those explanations are more likely to encourage process-focused thoughts that help reduce perceptions of injustice, and thus increase customer satisfaction with the recovery. Taken together, by giving adequate explanations compatible with speed of recovery, companies can improve their chances of maintaining customer satisfaction and prevent customer negative word-of-mouth and switching behavior.

This study infers that provision of explanations for the delayed response would help counter the potential damage

resulting from unfair recovery procedures, such as customer dissatisfaction, negative word-of-mouth, switching behavior and retaliation. When service companies are able to deliver a speedy recovery after service failure, customers tend to pay more attention on the recovery process and neglect superiority of the recovery. In such situation, providing customers with outcome-focused explanations, rather than process-focused explanations, may lead customers to focus more on the benefits of recovery and thus increase perceived justice and hence satisfaction with the timely response. On the other hand, when firms are incapable of delivering an immediate recovery, customers naturally focus more on the desirable outcome and neglect the procedure needed for a recovery.

(A précis of the article “Alleviating the negative impact of delayed recovery: process- versus outcome-focused explanations”, Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)