Delight and Outrage in the Performing Arts: A Critical Incidence Analysis

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Scott Swanson (Ph.D., University of Kentucky), Associate Professor of Marketing, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire; Eau Claire, WI, swanson@uwec.edu.

J. Charles Davis (Ph.D., University of Kentucky), Associate Professor of Marketing, Trinity University, San Antonio, TX, cdavis@trinity.edu.

Marketers are being challenged not just to satisfy customers but to delight them. In order to accomplish (avoid) customer delight (outrage), the factors that create these emotions must first be isolated and identified. The present study utilizes the critical incident technique to identify the interpersonal and non-interpersonal factors associated with creating delight or outrage in a performing arts setting. Findings provide rich contextualization of important quality factors, and illustrate the key role played by employees in managing the co-consumption process. In addition, the identified factors are associated with the commitment measures of word-of-mouth behavior, repatronage intentions, and donation intentions.

Hollander (1985) suggests that delight is the same or appearance of joy, and displeasure is the appearance or sense of evil. It is an era when consumers are often frustrated by organizations’ inability to satisfy. Is delight too high a standard? Satisfaction is a common measure of organizational effectiveness for both the profit and nonprofit sectors (Bench and Karmarkar 2000; Forbes 1996; Sheehan et al. 2000). Yet satisfaction has been a poor predictor of customer retention (Henry Thrun and Klein 1997; Jones and Vesper 1999, 2003), and commitment (Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan 2008) and, in fact, lacks a consistently demonstrable connection to actual customer behavior and growth (del Pozo 2001, p. 49). In both long-term customer relationships, it is important to move beyond the satisfaction-centric research for consumer responses that have significant influences on more broadly relevant outcomes (Edvardsson 1998, p. 37). Indeed, in a tough economy with consumers more conscious of their discretionary spending, customers are likely to have greater expectations for what is received.

Bennett (1997) suggests that it is the emotional context of service offerings that determines the future relationship between the customer and the organization. However, few studies have recognized that when service encounters go poorly (well), customers are not always simply dissatisfied (satisfied) but may feel outraged (delighted), e.g., Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan 2008; Contis, Past, and Fauz (2008); and Kim, Olshevsky, and King (2001). These strong emotional reactions (i.e., delight and outrage) may prove critical to future customer behavior toward the service organization.

Emotions are a key aspect of the consumption process, and they should be understood if the marketing manager is to understand his or her consumers successfully (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). As an extension of this experiential service, the performing arts is a particular challenge in that the nature of the product, designed to engage the senses and provide escape, transformation, or enlightenment, is especially vulnerable to the pressure of going beyond satisfying patrons. This pressure is greater for experiential services, such as the performing arts, as holistic benefits are key drivers for patrons engaging with these services. Fullfilled holistic needs have been shown to enhance customer delight, whereas exceeding customer utilitarian needs may only enhance satisfaction (Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan 2008).

This study uses the critical incident technique to identify the factors that lead to delight and outrage as reported by performing arts patrons. In particular, this research seeks to address two main questions (see figure 1): (1) From the patrons’ perspectives, what are the key interpersonal and non-interpersonal factors that lead to experiences perceived to result in delight or outrage in an arts context? and (2) What is the general relationship between patron delight/outrage and the commitment behaviors/intentions of word-of-mouth, repatronage, and attendance?

We begin by providing a brief overview of the literature on satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and the emotions of delight and outrage. This is followed by the research methodology and our empirical assessment of patrons reported encounters in a performing arts context. The paper concludes with a discussion of the