

SERVICE SWITCHING, WORD-OF-MOUTH, AND NEW PROVIDER SEARCH: A FIVE COUNTRY EXPLORATORY STUDY

Robert Frankel, University of North Florida
Scott R. Swanson, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire
Mariusz Sagan, Warsaw School of Economics

ABSTRACT

Based on a conceptual framework provided by Keaveney (1995), the current study explores the reasons service customers switch providers and the related post-switching behaviors in five countries. Specifically, we identify statistically significant differences between the investigated nations in 1) the frequency of the types of reported switching incidents, and 2) the word-of-mouth (private voice and public complaint) behavior. Search strategies for a new service provider were not found to differ substantially across the countries. The paper includes a discussion of the managerial implications of the findings as well as study limitations and potential future research directions.

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KEYWORDS: Consumer Research, Customer, Relationship

INTRODUCTION

An important aspect of services marketing involves understanding customer (dis)satisfaction, switching behavior, and ensuing behavioral outcomes. Development of a more thorough understanding of customers' switching behavior can help service managers to better avoid the negative consequences of customer defection and provide an important step towards preserving and improving valuable existing relationships. Unfortunately, most of the studies in the marketing literature examine customer acquisition and retention rather than customer switching behavior (Gupta, Kim and Sharma 2011). As service organizations continue to expand internationally it becomes more important to understand cross-national differences, and similarities, to serve consumer needs successfully in a global environment. Clark, Rajaratnam and Smith (1996) define international services as "deeds, performances and efforts conducted across national boundaries in critical contact with foreign cultures" (p. 15). Defining relationships among variables that are sensitive to cultural influences should be an important part of cross-cultural research.

This study utilizes Keaveney's model of customer service switching behavior (1995) to explore service switching incidents. Specifically, we examine how the incidents that trigger switching and related behaviors differ across five different countries. The next section of our paper briefly discusses culture and provides the foundation for the importance of exploring potential cross-national differences in 1) service switching factors, 2) post-switching word-of-mouth (private voice and public complaint), and 3) search activities utilized to obtain a new service provider. We then report the results of an empirical study that sampled customers of services in five countries (i.e., China, Brazil, Poland, Russia, United States) and follow that with a discussion of the managerial implications of the findings. The report concludes with noted study limitations and potential future research directions.

LITURATURE REVIEW

Culture refers to the set of ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that are widely shared among a group of people and that serve to guide their behavior (Goodenough 1973). Hofstede (1991) states that based on relatively similar history, language, political, legal and educational environment, nations “are the source of a considerable amount of common mental programming of their citizens” (p. 12). Culture is important in understanding behavioral differences as they create predispositions that link directly to the roles that members of a society accept (Kim, Wen and Doh 2010). “Culture is to human collectivity what personality is to the individual; it determines the identity of the human group in the same way as personality determines the identity of the individual” (Jones and McCleary 2004, p. 429). Particular values can be shared by numerous cultures, but the combination of value orientations within a culture is likely to be unique. A greater understanding of how differences across countries might be associated with switching behaviors may provide services managers insights to better identify appropriate practices when responding to service failure situations.

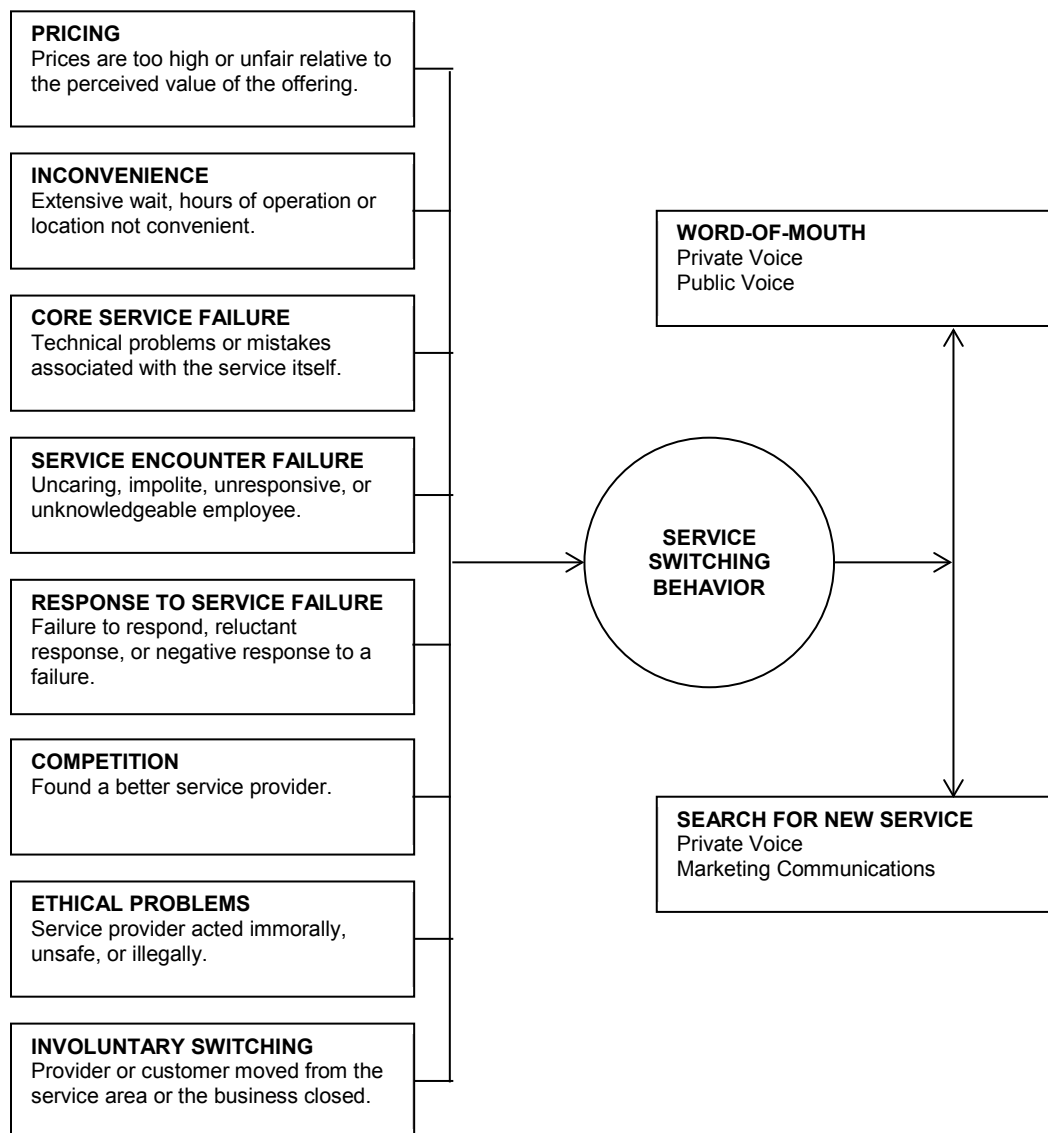
The inevitability of failure suggests that service organizations must be pro-active in identifying differences in cultural expectations in order to reduce switching behaviors and gain insights into preferences for recovery strategies (Becker 2000; Lin and Mattila 2006). Based on the conceptual framework provided by Keaveney (1995), the current study explores the reasons service customers switch providers and the related post-switching behaviors across five different national cultures. Specifically, we seek to identify if there are significant differences between nations in: 1) the frequency of the types of reported switching incidents, 2) the word-of-mouth (private voice and public complaint) behavior, and 3) the search for a new service provider. Maintaining a base of long-term customers is widely recognized as important by services marketers, while customers that do not return are lost market opportunities (Dutta, Venkatesh and Parsa 2007). Understanding why customers switch is important for firms to understand, yet “many CEOs have little insight into the causes of their customers’ switching behavior because they do not measure customer defections or know why customers are defecting” (Scanlan and McPhail 2000, p. 492). When there are opportunities for customers to engage in switching behavior, there are a number of switching factors that may affect their long-term loyalty (Keaveney 1995).

Based on a study of 45 different services, Keaveney (1995) provides a conceptual model of customers’ service switching behavior. The framework identifies eight key switching factors: 1) pricing (prices are too high, deceptive, or unfair relative to the perceived value of the service offering), 2) inconvenience (time to receive the service or appointment involves a perceived extensive wait, hours of operation or service provider location are not convenient), 3) core service failure (technical problems or mistakes associated with the service itself), 4) service encounter failure (a failure in the personal interaction between an employee of the service firm and the customer attributed to the employee being uncaring, impolite, unresponsive, or unknowledgeable), 5) response to service failure (the service provider failed to adequately address a failure situation by not responding, reluctantly responding, or responding in a negative way), 6) competition (customer found a service provider that provided a higher quality service, was more personable, or more reliable), 7) ethical problems (service provider deviated widely from social norms via immoral, unsafe, or illegal activities), and 8) involuntary switching (factors beyond the control of the service provider or customer such as either party moving from the service area or the business closing). In addition to identifying prominent switching factors, Keaveney (1995) suggested that post-switching behaviors include: 1) engaging in word-of-mouth and/or complaining, and 2) searching for a new service provider (see Figure 1).

After a customer has decided to discontinue utilizing a particular service provider, s/he may engage in word-of-mouth activities that could negatively impact the switched from firm. Private voice involves “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers” (Westbrook 1987, p. 261). Persuading others not to do

business with an organization may increase the customer’s confidence in their decision to switch and is a way to reduce the cognitive dissonance potentially caused by a concern that the wrong decision was made (Wangenheim 2005). Private voice communication, positive and negative, is motivated not only by informational considerations, but also by the desire to influence the actions of friends, relatives, and others. Private voice can be particularly effective as social pressure can be used to ensure that the receiver of the communication conforms to the provided recommendations (Arndt 1967). As such, the nature of word-of-mouth communication lends it particular impact in discouraging others from purchase, (Keaveney 1995).

Figure 1: A Model of Customers’ Service Switching Behavior



Public voice (i.e., complaining) is a confrontational form of word-of-mouth. As “complaints are regarded as key indicators signaling when recovery should be implemented, it is important to recognize cultural distinctions associated with complaint behavior” (Becker, 2000 p. 535). Actively engaging in public voice not only can help consumers to remedy their own situation, but also provides a chance to vent

negative emotions, reduce cognitive dissonance, and/or seek retaliation (Wangenheim 2005). Once a problem has been recognized, service consumers need adequate information to resolve it. Information search is the process in which the consumer surveys his or her environment for appropriate data to make a reasonable decision. An explicit search for information to find a new service provider may range from simply scanning memory to assembling information about possible service alternatives via private voice or the consulting of marketing communications.

Private voice is often actively sought and due to its perceived unbiased nature lends it particular impact in bringing new customers to a firm (Keaveney 1995) by reducing the perceived risk associated with making a buying decision (Murray 1991). Private voice is particularly important to service firms as the intangibility and experiential nature of many services can make pre-purchase evaluation more difficult and, therefore, much more risky for consumers considering purchase. When evaluating alternatives prior to making a choice for a new service provider, service customers not only rely on personal sources of information available to them, but also marketing communications (Grace and O’Cass 2003). Effective communication by the service organization can guide potential customers’ purchase decisions by informing them about a service as well as enhancing the image of that service. Specifically, marketing communications can act to capture the attention of potential customers, provide information, and reduce perceived purchase risks (Davies 1996).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Cooperation from a variety of businesses generated through the authors’ professional contacts was utilized in each country investigated. Data collection was completed in the spring of 2011. The countries were selected to provide global diversity by including cultures from Asia, Europe, South America, and North America. A researcher personally delivered the questionnaires to the managers of the employees. Respondents were not compensated for their participation in the research. In general, employees were hourly or low-to-mid level managers. This resulted in 1,858 usable responses. Respondents ranged in age from 17 to 87 years (mean = 31.8, SD = 12.8), with females making up 60.2% of the sample.

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Respondents by Country

Country	n	Gender		Mean	SD	Age Median	Minimum	Maximum
		Female	Male					
Brazil	259	171	88	41.2	13.6	40.0	17	87
China	177	99	78	30.6	9.0	28.0	18	72
Poland	353	220	133	27.6	9.5	24.0	17	80
Russia	351	230	121	28.8	11.7	23.0	17	63
United States	718	400	318	32.3	13.4	26.0	17	86
Total	1,858	1120	738	31.8	12.8	27.0	17	87

Respondents were first asked to think about the last time they had changed a service provider. They then noted, in response to an open-ended question, the service type and described what had caused them to switch service providers. The reporting of the switching incident was used to get the respondents to think clearly about a specific encounter before answering the questions of interest in this study. Keaveney’s (1995) categories for switching services were provided and respondents were asked to check the reason(s) that best explained why they had switched from the service provider. Subjects were then asked whether they had discussed the incident and with whom. If the subject had discussed the incident, he or she indicated the valence of the provided word-of-mouth via a three-item, 7-point, Likert-type scale adapted from Chiou, Droge and Havanich (2002) with anchors of Strongly Disagree (1) and Strongly Agree (7).

Specifically, subjects were asked if they had said negative things about, warned others, or tried to convince others not to use the switched from service. The word-of-mouth valence scale demonstrated strong internal consistency for the total sample ($\alpha = .88$) as well as within each country-based sample

($\alpha_{\text{Brazil}} = .84$, $\alpha_{\text{China}} = .84$, $\alpha_{\text{Poland}} = .83$, $\alpha_{\text{Russia}} = .86$, $\alpha_{\text{United States}} = .92$). Two 7-point, Likert-type questions were created to identify the search process(es) utilized to identify a new service provider. Respondents were asked to indicate how important (Not Important at All = 1, Very Important = 7) were each of the following: 1) word-of-mouth provided by friends, colleagues, and/or relatives, and 2) external search via articles, reviews, and traditional advertisements. Demographic information (i.e., gender, age in years) was sought in the last section of the questionnaire. To establish translation equivalence, the questionnaire was translated into the appropriate language(s), by bilingual native speaker(s), for each country where data was to be collected. Back translation into English was performed by a second bilingual individual, and then the back-translated English version and the original versions were compared by a third [bilingual] individual (Mullen 1995). When no further changes were recommended in a particular language, the questionnaire was finalized for usage. As the response options utilized the same units of measure in each country calibration equivalence was achieved (Mullen 1995).

RESULTS

Switching factors were most frequently noted in the following order – competition, pricing, core service failure, response to failed service, failed service encounter, inconvenience, and ethical problems (see Table 2). The category for involuntary switching was dropped from the analysis due to lack of response. Chi Square tests identified statistically significant differences between the countries for all switching behaviors other than price ($\chi^2 = 4.97$, $p = .290$). Switching due to inconvenience of the service provider ($\chi^2 = 46.51$, $p = .000$) was most likely to occur among the Chinese respondents. Core service failures ($\chi^2 = 64.47$, $p = .000$) and inadequate responses ($\chi^2 = 76.38$, $p = .000$) to service failures were most likely to be reported by the Brazil and China sample subjects. Unsatisfactory interactions with employees ($\chi^2 = 28.44$, $p = .000$) leading to switching were reported most often by respondents from China and Russia. Switching attributed to finding a higher quality or more reliable service provider ($\chi^2 = 42.46$, $p = .000$) was least likely to be identified in the sample from Poland. The service provider acting illegally, in an unsafe, or an unethical manner ($\chi^2 = 164.26$, $p = .000$) was indicated most often by Brazilian respondents.

Table 2: Classification of Critical Behaviors That Lead to Services Switching

Service Switching Category	Brazil		China		Poland		Russia		United States		Totals	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Competition***	141	54.4	72	40.7	109	30.9	176	50.1	322	44.8	820	44.1
Pricing	97	37.5	62	35.0	130	35.8	107	30.5	263	35.6	659	35.5
Core Service Failure***	128	49.4	63	35.6	67	19.0	113	32.2	254	35.4	625	33.6
Response to Failed Service***	117	45.2	62	35.0	56	15.9	76	21.7	192	26.7	503	27.1
Failed Service Encounter***	75	29.0	68	38.4	72	20.4	112	31.9	170	23.7	497	26.7
Inconvenience***	61	23.6	65	36.7	60	17.0	91	25.9	115	16.0	392	21.1
Ethical Problems***	66	25.5	20	11.3	9	2.5	9	2.6	31	4.3	135	7.3

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

Overall valence of the respondents' word-of-mouth was negative in nature (mean = 4.41, SD = 1.89). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) suggests that word-of-mouth valence differed significantly ($F_{4,1227} = 3.76$, $p = .005$) between countries. Duncan post-hoc analysis indicates that respondents from Poland were significantly less negative in their comments than respondents from Brazil, China or the United States, with Russian respondents falling in the middle (see Table 3).

As reported in Table 4, the majority (66.4%) of respondents indicated that they did discuss the reported service switching incident with friends, family members, and co-workers. Chi Square analysis ($\chi^2 = 33.06$, $p = .000$) suggests that Russian subjects were significantly less likely (54.4%) and Chinese respondents significantly more likely (75.1%), to have engaged in private word-of-mouth about the switched from company than did those participants from Brazil (65.3%), Poland (67.7%), or the United

States (69.9%). With whom the incident was discussed also differed significantly based on the respondents' country ($\chi^2_{\text{Family}} = 55.60, p = .000$; $\chi^2_{\text{Friends}} = 13.28, p = .010$; $\chi^2_{\text{Co-workers}} = 89.35, p = .000$).

Table 3: ANOVA Results for Word-of-Mouth Valence by Country of Sample***

Word-of-Mouth Valence	Brazil		China		Respondent Category Poland		Russia		United States	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1					4.02	1.72	4.35	2.12		
2	4.60	1.93	4.48	1.68			4.35	2.12	4.55	1.89

*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Specifically, Chinese subjects appeared to be much less likely (30.5%) to discuss the switching incident with family members relative to any of the other samples (Brazil = 58.8%, Poland = 60.4%, Russia = 59.7%, United States = 66.5%). Discussing the switching incident with friends was likely for all of the cultures, although findings suggest that this was less likely in the United States (60.8%) than in the other countries investigated (China = 69.5%, Brazil = 69.1%, Poland = 68.7%, Russia = 73.8%). As the social network expands to co-workers, greater discrepancies in discussing the switching incident were reported. Least likely to have discussed the incident with co-workers were respondents from Poland (8.3%) and Russia (12.6%). Subjects from Brazil and the United States were substantially more likely to include co-workers in a discussion of their switching incident at 23.0% and 17.8% respectively. However, the Chinese participants were most talkative with co-workers with 46.6% indicating that they had engaged co-workers in this discussion.

Table 4: Percentage of Respondents Using Private Voice By Country of Sample

Country	Discussed***	Incident Discussed and with Whom		
		Family***	Friends**	Co-workers***
Brazil	65.3%	58.8%	69.1%	23.0%
China	75.1%	30.5%	69.5%	46.6%
Poland	67.7%	60.4%	68.7%	8.3%
Russia	54.4%	59.7%	73.8%	12.6%
United States	69.9%	66.5%	60.8%	17.8%
Total	66.4%	59.3%	66.4%	19.0%

*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Chi Square analysis ($\chi^2 = 56.97, p = .000$) indicates that respondents were significantly different in their complaint behavior. Specifically, Brazilian (18.2%) and American (13.7 %) subjects were substantially more likely to have indicated that they had complained directly to the switched from service provider, relative to participants from Poland (5.7%), Russian (1.6%), or China (0.0%). The majority of respondents indicated that they had found a new service provider (85.1%). Findings indicate that the respondents relied predominately on private voice provided by friends, colleagues, relatives, and/or others (mean = 5.20, SD = 1.84), relative to more formalized marketing communications (mean = 3.55, SD = 2.08) when choosing a new service provider. There were no statistically significant differences between group means for either private voice ($F_{4,1569} = .55, p = .69$) or external search ($F_{4,1569} = 1.73, p = .14$) strategies, as determined by one-way ANOVA (see Table 5).

Table 5: Country by Search for New Service Provider

Country	n	Private Voice		External Search	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
China	125	5.34	1.50	3.26	1.92
Brazil	227	5.19	2.15	3.50	2.41
Poland	299	5.18	1.66	3.42	1.91
Russia	281	5.30	2.02	3.77	2.29
United States	641	5.14	1.79	3.58	1.96
Total	1573	5.20	1.84	3.55	2.08

*p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This research extends previous findings on service switching by comparing five culturally diverse subject groups. Shamkarmahesh, Ford and LaTour (2003) suggest that studying why relationships end can provide insight in to how to maintain and enhance current relationships. Overall, the results of this study suggest that cultural differences can play an important part in understanding service consumers' switching and exploratory behaviors. As service organizations become more globally diverse, understanding cultural differences becomes increasingly important for building effective customer relationships. Specifically, the determinants of customers' decisions to switch service providers appear to vary in different countries. The presence and/or introduction of "competition" was (with the exception of Poland) the most frequently identified factor that determined service customer switching. Interestingly, while the existence and intensity of competition certainly varies across the economic models of the five countries in our study, our results reveal that such competition remains a driving determinant nonetheless.

Second, despite considerable noticeable differences in the pattern of switching incidents, the "pricing" factor was also consistently identified as an important determinant of service customer switching. Thus, pricing that was perceived as unfair equally resulted in switching actions in all five of the cultures investigated in this study. This finding supports previous research suggesting that consumer's tend to be price conscious, often relying heavily on price in choice situations (Beckett, Hewer and Howcroft 2000). Third, while the critical behaviors identified by customers ranged widely (e.g., from most mentioned to least mentioned) in Brazil, Poland, Russia, and the United States, it is intriguing that Chinese consumers exhibited a notable consistency of emphasis across each of the critical behaviors with the exception of "ethical problems." Fourth, the lack of respondents reporting involuntary switching in this current study is notable. Switching due to factors that are beyond the control of either customers or service providers had been previously identified as a common switching trigger by Keaveney (1995). This finding may be due to how the study was positioned. By asking respondents to recall their most recent service provider switching incident, it is likely that they focused on situations that evoked a negative or dissatisfactory experience, rather than something that neither they nor the respective service provider could control.

Summarizing the role of the critical behaviors that lead to service switching, it seems advisable for service providers to pay strict attention to the competition, and especially to heed their pricing strategies. As noted immediately above, ignoring the potential role of involuntary switching is not advisable either. Clearly other factors come into play as well, as illustrated in Table 2, and should be noted; however, competition and pricing appear to be dominant. Regarding word-of-mouth, the negative valence of respondents is to be expected. Interestingly, the very strong negative tone of Chinese consumers is surprising – as is the more muted negative comments from Poland. Strong feelings clearly exist, but they are not shared openly. This provides a cautionary note to service providers: silence does not imply a lack of displeasure. Regarding private voice, approximately 2/3 of respondents did discuss the reported switching incident (with family, friends, or co-workers). This result verifies the requirement that service providers recognize the impact of consumer dis-satisfaction, irrespective of country or culture. Moreover, when respondents did discuss the incident, they were, generally speaking, most likely to do so with friends, then family, and then with co-workers.

In examining private voice by specific country, the "quieter" voice exhibited in Russia may result, perhaps, from the government's historical "monitoring" of society – and thus may play a role in Russian consumers' unwillingness to discuss an incident with others. However, when such discussion does occur in Russia, it is not surprising that private voice occurs with friends and/or family rather than with co-workers (due to the monitoring issue). The high level of private voice in China, which initially may seem surprising, occurs with friends and co-workers, and to a much lesser extent with the family – but perhaps can be explained because of the strong collective nature of the culture. The much greater willingness of

respondents from Brazil and the United States (relative to Russia and Poland) to discuss incidents with co-workers likely reflects the relatively more open culture in both countries.

Regarding complaining behavior, the findings support previous contentions that Asian consumers often do not complain directly to the service provider, as the taking of such a public action would be viewed as an extreme behavior (Lin and Mattila 2006). This is likely a consequence of the importance of saving face and maintaining harmony. A similar discomfort or unwillingness to complain directly to the service provider exists in Russia; previous research is scant or non-existent on this subject. Again, we surmise that perhaps the historical government “monitoring” of society may play a role in Russian consumers’ unwillingness to confront the service provider, whom might be viewed as an “authority” of sorts.

Once a service customer has made the decision to switch providers the findings suggest that marketing communications should not be used in isolation, irrespective of the culture. Talking with others is noted as being utilized at a substantially higher level than engaging with marketing-controlled communications. We emphasize that the powerful influence of private voice cannot be under-estimated. While relative differences (with regard to family, friends, and co-workers) across countries do exist, it appears that people do, in fact, talk and that their voices matter. The development and usage of related budgets of marketing communication efforts should take this fact into consideration.

The current study explored both the reasons service customers switch providers and related post-switching behaviors. Respondents were 1,858 hourly employees and low-to-mid level managers in five countries. Utilizing chi square analysis and ANOVA, statistically significant differences were found between the investigated nations in 1) the frequency of the types of reported switching incidents, and 2) the word-of-mouth (private voice and public complaint) behavior. Search strategies for a new service provider were not found to differ substantially across the countries. The current study utilized self-reported switching incidents. Scenario-based experiments could provide some advantages over self-report by improving internal validity (Michel 2001) and avoiding response bias due to memory lapse (Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999). Future researchers may wish to investigate the constructs in the current study via additional methodologies. Using national culture does provide a convenient unit of analysis. However, future researchers may be able to add additional insights into switching behavior differences by examining other sources of national differences. Finally, the current cross-cultural study relied on broad cultural dimensions which may overlook the potential effects of intro-cultural variations. As Au (1999) suggests, ignoring the population distribution of a characteristic within a culture (i.e., intra-cultural variation) can reduce the accuracy of an investigation by over-simplifying the concept of culture. It is important that other levels of culture analysis be considered.

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BIOGRAPHY

Robert Frankel (Ph.D., Michigan State University) is Chair and Richard DeRaismes Kip Professor of Marketing and Logistics in the Coggin College of Business at the University of North Florida. His research interests include marketing, logistics, supply chain management, and firm/cross-firm integration. His research has been published in *Journal of Operations Management*, *International Journal of Logistics Management*, *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, *International Journal of Management*, *Journal of Business to Business Marketing*, and *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, among others. Department of Management, Marketing & Logistics, 4567 St. Johns Bluff Road, South, Jacksonville, FL 32224-2675, rfrankel@unf.edu, Tel: 904-620-1346, Fax: 904-620-2782.

Scott Swanson (Ph.D., University of Kentucky) is an Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. His research interests include service failure and recovery; non-profit marketing, and pedagogy. His research has been published in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, and the *European Journal of Marketing*, among others. Department of Management and Marketing, Schneider Hall 449, Eau Claire, WI 54702-4004, swansosr@uwec.edu, Tel: 715-836-5127, Fax: 715-836-2944.

Mariusz Sagan (Ph.D., Warsaw School of Economics) is an adjunct in management at the Warsaw School of Economics, Poland. A Tempus scholar at several European universities, his research interests include marketing management, global marketing strategy, European integration and pedagogy. His research has been published in *Marketing Education Review*, *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, and *Cross Cultural Management*, among others. He is also the author of several chapters in books on globalization, internationalization, export policy and European market integration. Katedra Biznesu Miedzynarodowego, Al. Niedpodleglosci 164, pok. 318, Budynek F, 02-554-Warsaw, Poland, mariusz.sagan@sgh.waw.pl