

Effects of customer education in terms of customer perceived value: the role of customer evaluation skills¹

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *The aim of this study is to propose a theoretically grounded conceptual framework focusing on the effects of customer education process in terms of customer perceived value. In doing so, it especially highlights the role of customer evaluation skills.*

Methodology: *This is a conceptual paper whose analytical approach draws heavily on theoretical evidence published in service marketing and management literature. Using this analysis, nine research propositions are developed to highlight the relationships between customer education, evaluation skills and perceived value.*

Findings: *Customer education is a under-researched concept in the service marketing and management literature. It is a process aimed at informing and training customers in order to increase their knowledge levels (basic, general, and deep). It affects customer perceived value in terms of benefits (skill of information evaluation, satisfaction and appreciation, perceived risk, purchasing power, and protection of rights and interests), and outlays (economic commitment, product complexity, information accessibility, time employed, cognitive and behavioral effort, and resulting stress). Customer evaluation skills mediate this relationship by allowing customers to perceive value in the function of the different knowledge levels acquired.*

Practical implications: *Providing customers with a number of information and cognitive tools for evaluating products reduces information asymmetries between a company and its customers. Therefore, at least in principle, this can reduce the power of the company. Managers should consider this risk by both creating knowledge about service alternatives and evaluating what information can be offered to customers for increasing their knowledge levels. Managers should favour the development of initiatives aimed at strengthening customers education because it allow companies to obtain a number of advantages.*

Originality of the paper: *The study contributes to enriching the analyses the post-purchase evaluation phase by proposing a conceptual framework primarily considering cognitive dimension of customer education.*

Key words: customer education; customer perceived value; service quality; customer knowledge; customer evaluation skill

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1. Introduction

Strong propensity of consumers to self-service, practice and less time spent on purchases, as well as better knowledge of products, contribute to commoditise goods (convenience and shopping) and services. Companies generally react by adopting a differentiation strategy for their products with respect to those of competitors (Rangan and Bowman, 1992) through enhancing or innovating attributes that are meaningful, relevant and valuable for customers (Carpenter *et al.*, 1994). As benefits provided by means of the differentiation are not readily available from other substitutes, customers become less sensitive to price differentials (Barney, 2007). Over time, customers tend to get used to additional benefits and so become less willing to pay any premium price. In addition, competitors may imitate product innovations, introduce superior attributes or launch the same but lower-priced products. In this way, the advantages previously obtained are diluted (Porter, 1980). Therefore, differentiation only provides temporary advantages (Rangan and Bowman, 1992; D'Aveni, 2010). In addition, it is a futile strategy in some business contexts, such as food product marketing (McGrath, 2013; Sogn-Grundvåg and Young, 2013).

As customers commoditise purchases if their involvement is low, commoditisation processes can induce customers, even if well informed and careful, not to perceive value in terms of cognitive and emotional understanding and involvement, of goods and services they intend to buy. In order to deal with this problem, companies may invest in consumer education by offering to customers information useful for shopping and product usage, and by creating the conditions for developing the skill to capitalise on such expert information.

Studies in consumer education conducted since the 1970s have embodied economic (e.g. Armstrong and Uhl, 1971; LaForge, 1989) and marketing (e.g. McNeal, 1978; Fast *et al.*, 1989; Carsky, 1991) perspectives. Today this topic is also examined with specific regard to private and public initiatives to adopt sustainable consumption behavior (e.g., Goldsmith and Piscopo, 2014). Essentially, these studies aim to protect consumers' interests and address the topic from the consumer's point of view. Several studies focus on consumer education programmes (e.g. Bloom and Ford, 1979; Oumlil *et al.*, 2000; Xiao *et al.*, 2004; Makela and Peters, 2004; Aubert and Gotteland, 2010). As with goods marketing, only recently has the consumer education issue been examined in the service marketing literature (Oumlil *et al.*, 2000; Burton, 2002). Such studies on services highlight that consumer education is mainly based on the following three elements: a) presentation of information related to goods, services and their providers, b) improvement of basic and in-depth knowledge, and c) development of skills to use information. Effects of information on consumer behaviour have particularly been discussed with regard to services' intangibility (see Murray, 1991). Recently consumer education and information have been seen as concepts intended as part of a continuum in which consumer information is a lower-level activity useful for achieving a basic knowledge, whereas consumer education is at

a higher and advanced level of knowledge (Burton, 2002). For us, educating consumers requires that companies not only provide information but also create conditions that allow customers to evaluate such information, increase their level of knowledge and understanding, and feel involved in their purchasing activities. In this way, consumer education is a process through which customers can improve their perceived value.

This paper proposes a theoretically grounded conceptual framework focusing on the effects of customer education in terms of customer perceived value. In doing so, it especially highlights the role of customer evaluation skills. It primarily considers the cognitive dimension, which is not affective and emotional, of the post-purchase evaluation phase. According to Aubert's study (2008), we focus on this phase for the increasing complexity of products (Thompson *et al.*, 2005), and the importance given to consumption in value creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

The study particularly contributes to enriching the analyses of customer education in the following five ways: 1) it offers an overview of the consumer education issue in a service marketing perspective; 2) it proposes a conceptual framework aimed at highlighting customer education as process feeding a number of consumer's knowledge levels, and the effects of customer education in terms of perceived value by outlining the role of customer evaluation skills; 3) it examines the benefits and outlays that educated customers can perceive; 4) it suggests a number of practical implications to managers that want to invest in customer education for improving customer perceived value; and 5) it provides some research directions in order to encourage future researchers to explore this area in greater depth.

This is a conceptual paper whose analytical approach draws heavily on theoretical evidence published mainly in the service marketing and management literature. Using this analysis, nine propositions are developed to examine the relationships between customer education process, evaluation skills and perceived value. Each research proposition is also supported by some actual examples whose applicability to different types of services makes an increased comprehensibility of the paper.

2. Consumer education in service marketing and management literature

Customer education is defined as the companies' investments in instructional activities aimed at improving customer expertise in relation to the goods and services they market (Honebein and Cammarano, 2005).

With the exception of consumer misbehaviour studies (e.g. Harris and Reynolds, 2003; Reynolds and Harris, 2009; Fisk *et al.*, 2010; Baccarani and Brunetti, 2011; Daunt and Harris, 2012), research focused on consumer education in a service context is particularly limited (Fast *et al.*, 1989). It is specifically related to the context of technical services such as specialist information technology suppliers, where information alone is often insufficient to ensure high levels of service quality (Carsky, 1991).

Consumer education is examined with respect to: a) importance of consumer education programmes; b) relationship between consumer education and service quality; and c) relationship between consumer education and customer perceived value.

2.1 Importance of consumer education programmes

If consumers are informed and educated about the expectations and features of services and collaborate with service providers, service performance will be successful. In other words, the effectiveness of the service delivery process depends on the role played by consumers (as well as service personnel) during service encounters (Solomon *et al.*, 1985). One of the factors that affects service performance is the script defined as “a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a participant or as an observer” (Abelson, 1976, p. 33).

In order to perform their role, as well as sticking to the service script, consumers must be educated in sociality: by means of the socialisation process, consumers are able to understand the service organisation's values, as well as how to operate within the servicescape and develop knowledge and skills useful to interact with employees and other customers during service encounters (Kelley *et al.*, 1990).

To this end, consumer education programmes are useful in helping consumers to understand their role and what they can expect from the service delivery process, even before they experience it. Such programmes include formalised consumer orientation programmes, written documents provided to customers (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2012), learning by service personnel and other customers or users, and signals and cues allocated within the servicescape (Bonfanti, 2013).

Specific studies focus on consumer education programmes for mature consumers (Oumlil *et al.*, 2000) suffering from a disorder termed “learned helplessness” by psychologists (LaForge, 1989). Concerns about organisations and the consumption process, physical disability, financial instability (LaForge, 1989) and lack of experience (Aronson, 1993) can cause a feeling of helplessness and loss of control over various activities. Such programmes contribute to prepare elderly consumers to more adroitly confront the marketplace.

2.2 Relationship between consumer education and service quality

Burton's (2002) study identifies three different approaches to the relationships between consumer education and service quality.

The first approach argues that consumer education can be used as a core element of service quality in a competitive strategy perspective: consumer education allows differentiation of service organisations from competitors, adds value to service offerings, increases loyalty and assists in customer retention (Burton, 2002). In addition, consumer education can help service organisations to obtain and keep satisfied customers, contribute to the favourable attitude among consumers towards a product or company and reduce confrontation with consumer advocates (McNeal, 1978). Financial (e.g. Dery, 1998), software (e.g. Kaeter, 1994) and healthcare services (e.g. Gummesson, 2000) are some of the service contexts more often examined in the service marketing and management literature.

The second approach is based on the assumption that consumers need to be educated in a post-modern world. Service organisations should educate themselves about the change of consumer behaviour, which is depicted as powerful and reflexive (e.g. Brown, 1995; Firat *et al.*, 1995). However, it is impossible precisely to define such behaviour (Cova, 1999). In addition, an informed consumer is one empowered to make decisions and participate meaningfully in the customer-provider relationship (Bielavitz *et al.*, 2011).

The third approach assumes that concepts of consumer education and service quality are not associated with each other. When a consumer is educated, they are able to identify poor service quality. This change is damaging for any service organisation, such as financial services (Burton, 1994). Education leads to a reduction in information asymmetries between the firm and its customers. Service organisations could paradoxically maintain such information asymmetry and not reconfigure the knowledge relationship (Nayyar, 1990). Customer education has been found to be positively associated with customer expertise (Bell and Eisingerich, 2007): if customer expertise is high, the positive effect of technical service quality on customer loyalty is indeed stronger, while the positive relationship between functional service quality and customer loyalty decreases. In addition, when customers become expert, they perceive a reduced risk in switching firms and, as a result, are more confident in assessing competitive alternatives (Heilman *et al.*, 2000).

2.3 Relationship between consumer education and customer perceived value

In the service marketing and management literature, consumer education studies highlight the importance of presenting information related to goods, services and their providers, to improve basic and in-depth knowledge and develop skills for using information in a service quality perspective (Oumlil *et al.*, 2000; Burton, 2002).

Customer education can also be analysed in terms of customer perceived value, which is fundamentally defined in a service marketing perspective in the following ways (Zeithaml, 1988): a) value is a low price; b) value is everything I want in goods or a service; c) value is quality obtained in exchange for the price paid; d) value is what I get in return for what I give. In the latter sense, the customer perceived value concept is an expression of the benchmark between benefits that customers receive by service performance or a satisfactory purchase in relation to perceived outlays or sacrifices made in order to obtain that particular service or goods (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996; Grönroos, 1997).

Lovelock (2001) argues that perceived value can be enhanced by adding benefits to the service or by reducing outlays associated with purchase. Accordingly, if the sacrifice made is not too high, customers recognise a high perceived value level (Lovelock, 1995).

In this paper we highlight the relationship existing between consumer education process and customer perceived value.

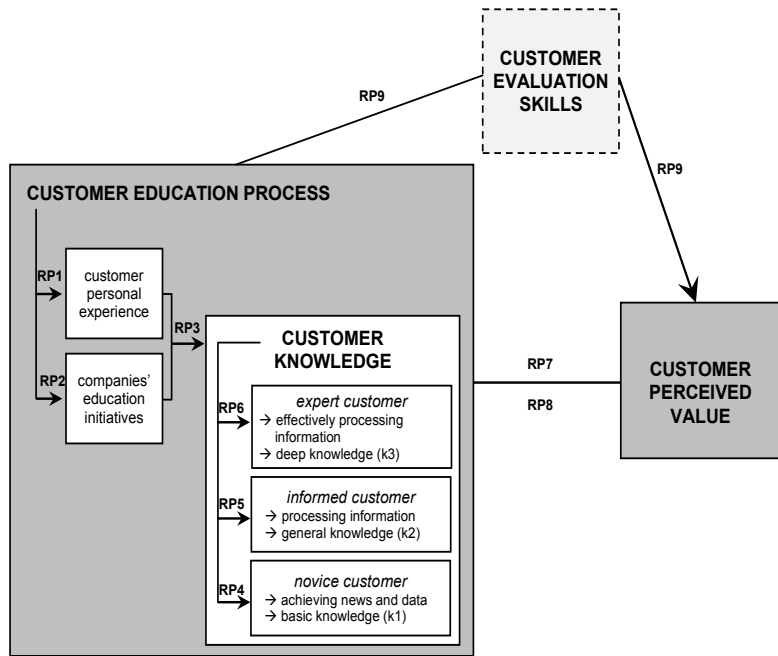
3. Effects of customer education process: a conceptual framework

Customer education is a concept variously defined in the literature, notably in consumer behaviour studies. Nelson *et al.* (1977) argue that consumer education includes the development of skills, concepts and understanding to help consumers attain a maximum level of satisfaction and utilisation of their human and material resources. Wells and Atherton (1998) maintain that consumer education is concerned with the skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding needed by individuals living in a consumer society. Bannister and Monsma (1982) define consumer education as the process of gaining the knowledge and skills needed to manage consumer resources and take action to influence those factors, which affect consumer decisions.

In this section, we develop a conceptual framework highlighting the following three aspects: 1) sources of customer education; 2) effects of customer education in terms of customer perceived value, and 3) role of customer evaluation skills in affecting this relationship (see Figure 1).

We will discuss these constructs and their relationships by presenting corresponding and testable research propositions (RPs).

Fig. 1: A conceptual framework



Source: Our elaboration

3.1 Sources of customer education

Customers personal experiences contribute to generating their education process. Personal experience is subjective in nature; it includes

the interactions people develop both by using a good or service and during the purchasing process, service encounters and more generally, different stages of life. Recent definitions of customer experience highlight that “customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction. This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer’s involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual)” (Gentile *et al.*, 2007, p. 397). In addition, “customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company. Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representatives of a company’s product, service or brand and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews and so forth” (Meyer and Schwager, 2007, p. 118). Customer experience can also be defined by means of two sub-constructs: 1) intensiveness, which is ‘the amount or the frequency with which a person has been exposed to a product category’, and 2) extensiveness, which is ‘the breadth or the variety of exposure a person has accumulated in a product environment throughout her consumption history’ (Hoeffler *et al.*, 2013, p. 332). Customer experience affects the preference learning and formation process. Customers can accumulate experiences by developing curiosity and interest for a topic in a number of ways, such as participating in training courses, reading specialised magazines, living experiences in relation to purchase of goods and services, relating to experts, as well as gathering information by means of websites, word-of-mouth, recommendations, criticisms, advertising, news and reports. Therefore, the following proposition is made:
RPI: Customer education is a process including customer personal experiences.

Also, education initiatives provided by companies contribute to improve customer education. Such actions are objective in nature and include customer education programmes such as seminars and training activities, as well as external communication activities such as printed materials (e.g. instruction booklets, flyers and tourist guides), websites, e-mail, consulting services and personal advice.

Education programmes allow customers to obtain information and advice, learn how to make rational and efficient future choices, and protect their rights. Research on consumer behaviour (e.g. Garman, 1979; Mathew, 2014) has highlighted that a positive relationship exists between participation in customer education programmes and knowledge levels. With specific regards to knowledge of safety principles, Staelin (1978) noted how increased knowledge leads to safe behaviour, as the consumer both has a better understanding of how products work, and is more able to accurately assess the hazards associated with these products.

In order to increase customer knowledge levels, companies can develop a number of fundamental communication activities (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2012). Providing information by preparing customers for service delivery is useful to novice customers who need to be informed and trained, as well as know what they should expect from a service provider. Confirming

service performance in relation to standards and expectations is another activity by which customers can perceive value: it is important that service providers communicate to customers that the provision of services is correctly made, as not all customers are able to evaluate service effectiveness, because of their inexperience, service invisibility or technicality. Communication skills of service providers can reassure customers. Clarifying after-sales expectations is a third possible activity: as sellers often promise something that goes beyond customers' expectations, service providers can prevent disappointments, complaints and poor service by clarifying the situation during the conclusion of the contract. Finally, educating customers to avoid peak periods of demand is advantageous for both the customer, who will enjoy faster service, and for the service organisation because it reduces problems related to excess demand. Thus:

RP2: Customer education is a process including companies' education initiatives.

Service knowledge, as well as access and intent to use it, is an indispensable factor for any customer who wants to use a service effectively (Yeatts *et al.*, 1992). Jointly integrating different information promotes increased knowledge levels (Peter and Olson, 2002) and thus education of customers (Aubert and Gotteland, 2010). Customer personal experiences and companies' education initiatives are aimed at informing and training customers in relation to goods and services attributes and properties as well as their use, production process, and metatext connected to goods and services purchasing. During such a process, customers increase their knowledge levels to become either novice, informed or expert customers. Hence:

RP3: Customer education is a process feeding customer's knowledge.

In particular, at first customers are novice. They (deliberately and unintentionally) achieve news and data, which is a set of qualitative, technical and quantitative notions and aspects. Although such information is devoid of meaning and interpretation (Narduzzo, 2003), customers can acquire by means of them a basic knowledge level (k1) about facts and events relevant or interesting to them. As sources of news and data collection are many and varied, customers can acquire messages in a scattered and fragmented way. For this reason, a customer's knowledge generally is distracting and redundant (Panati and Golinelli, 1991). For instance, if a customer seeks to buy a Persian carpet, its country of origin, the number of knots, and the dyes used are technical attributes useful to compare among products. With respect to a convenience good as pasta, the first level of knowledge lies in its physical characteristics, nutritional properties and ways to cook it, at least according to the simplest recipes. In terms of service, by considering the opera as an example of performing art, customers need of basic information and data such as who, where and when wrote it, the genre it can be considered part of, where and when it has been played, its most famous interpreters, the narrative it contains. Therefore:

RP4: Novice customers hold a basic knowledge level.

Novice customers become informed customers by means of an interpretation process of news and data acquired by them. This process involves the cognitive steps of exposition, attention and understanding (Dalli and Romani, 2003). Exposition is the physical and mental skill of receiving information within an environment (Peter and Olson, 2002). As attention is part of the process in which the customer consciously considers certain information (Hawkins *et al.*, 2001), it implies selectivity of information (Lachman *et al.*, 1979) and presupposes that the customer is receptive to information processing (Kahneman, 1973). Understanding is giving a complete meaning to the information gathered by integrating new and existing knowledge (Hawkins *et al.*, 2001): customers conduct an information search by relying on both internal and external sources. Internal sources refer to things that they already know (their knowledge base), whereas external sources of information are those that are available in the marketplace (Su *et al.*, 2008). In other words, information is news and data processed, measured, categorised, filtered and synthesised. As it assumes significance, customers can use information in order to make a decision. Any information has to fully respond to the customer's needs and be immediately used without requiring additional processing (Panati and Golinelli, 1991). According to Burton (2002), customer information is a lower-level activity providing general knowledge (k2). Jointly integrating different information increases knowledge levels (Peter and Olson, 2002; Aubert and Gotteland, 2010). For instance, if customers understand the meaning of a Persian carpet and are able to interpret and decode data and news, they can appreciate it. Understanding how pasta is best eaten, which dressings are best suited, which other course best complete the meal allows customers to examine the effects of pasta consumption on human body and its health. With regards to opera, customers obtain a deeper understanding of it if they gain a comparison with different operas of the same author or the same era, a knowledge of the respective genre and of other genres, the criteria of a good performance. Thus:

RP5: Informed customers hold a general knowledge level.

The third customers' knowledge level involves equipping them with the skills and abilities to utilise information (Burton, 2002). In other words, customers are trained to the services delivery and goods purchase process through their learning (Peter and Olson, 2002), which can be direct (individual experience in relation to perceived information and processing of a behavioural reaction) or indirect (imitation of others' behaviour). If customers possess a richer experience base and deeper knowledge level (k3), they become experts. Expert customers differ from novices in the degree, content and organization of their knowledge (Mitchell and Dacin, 1996). Expertise is defined as the customer's ability to be more selective in their information search (Johnson, 1998), able to acquire information in a less structured environment (Brucks, 1985), make discerning choices, resolve problems effectively and seek further information (Ritters, 2003), and process new information in greater depth (e.g. Alba and Hutchinson, 2000; Bell and Eisengerich, 2007). A few consumer studies highlight that

the relationship between customers' experience of the product and knowledge is inverted (Punj and Staelin, 1983; Johnson and Russo, 1984): expert customers can process new information with more knowledge and develop a more critical attitude (e.g., Aubert and Gotteland, 2010), but with increasing knowledge they can ignore information and think that the effort employed is not worthwhile (Moorthy *et al.*, 1997). For instance, if customers know other kinds of carpets in addition to Persian carpets, and also the culture of a carpet, they become experts in the purchase of that product. When customers are able to understand pasta's meaning in the whole socio-cultural context in terms of a number of facts, anecdotes, and stories, their consumption experience is more complete and satisfying. Also, customers feel experts when they holds a full comprehension of the meaning of the opera in past times and in the present time, the position such an opera has in music history, and its impact on music evolution. Hence:

RP6: Expert customers hold a deep knowledge level.

3.2 Effects of customers education in terms of customer perceived value

As highlighted in the literature review section, customer education can affect customer perceived value in terms of benefits and outlays.

With specific regard to customer perceived benefits, they include the advantages that the customer achieves through the education process evaluation skills and also a) satisfaction and appreciation, b) perceived risk, c) purchasing power, and d) protection of their rights and interests. Customer education improves decision making under changing situations and provides greater control over personal economic destiny, so it increases personal appreciation and satisfaction (e.g., Oumlil *et al.*, 2000; Shih and Venkatesh, 2004; Aubert, 2008; Aubert and Gotteland, 2010). For example, if service organisations explain to customers the reasons for a certain system of service delivery, as well as how they can benefit from it, customers will better appreciate the service because of this education (Stepanek, 1980). The collection of a lot of information about available alternatives leads customers to reduce their perceived risk. Such risk may be related to the uncertainty that the product meets their expectations, or the conditioning of others (i.e. family or friends) about the purchase choices they made. Several studies (e.g. Beatty and Smith, 1987) have shown that by increasing the perceived risk associated with the product, the customer is looking for much more information. Customers can also benefit from increased purchasing power resulting from more effective buying (Oumlil *et al.*, 2000), and can protect their rights and interests as well as promote social civilisation and progress (Purutcuoglu and Bayraktar, 2004).

Customer perceived outlays concern the disadvantages that customers have identified in obtaining the desired goods and services. Such sacrifices include: a) economic commitment, b) product complexity, c) information accessibility, and d) time employed, cognitive and behavioural effort, and resulting stress. Customer education can require customers in the information search phase to support an economic commitment related,

for example, to fuel costs involved in visits to multiple stores, or costs for the purchase of specialised magazines. In addition to economic effort, product complexity implies more information searching in order to understand attributes and functionalities. Information searching and processing activities increase if a product is new and specific. Further, information accessibility - that is, its availability in the place and in the format desired by customers - affects customer perceived value. Some studies (Bettman *et al.*, 1991; Miyazaki *et al.*, 2000) noted that costs related to information searching and processing are reduced if, *caeteris paribus*, such activities are easily accessible to customers. Accordingly, customers can make decisions more accurately and satisfactorily. Time employed in information searching and processing, cognitive and behavioural effort and the resulting stress from such activities, are sacrifices that customers must generally make.

These observations inspire the following propositions:

RP7: Customer education will have a positive effect on the customer perceived value.

RP8: Customer education will have a negative effect on the customer perceived value.

3.3 Role of customer evaluation skills

Any knowledge level gained by customers during the customer education process improves evaluation skill (Bettman and Sujun, 1987; Narduzzo, 2003). Customers develop evaluation skills based on personal experience and companies' education initiatives not in order to make a choice but rather to evaluate goods and services in terms of their attributes and use. Information improve customer evaluation skills in relation to product quality (Sproles *et al.*, 1980) because over time customers become able to identify and appreciate higher-quality products. In addition, extensiveness more than intensiveness of experience increases the ability to predict the customer's own preferences (Hoeffler *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, it seems reasonable to argue that expertise level affects customer perception in the after-use phase. "Since expert customers possess a richer knowledge and experience base, they may process new information in greater depth (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987, 2000; Johnson and Russo, 1984; Mason and Bequette, 1998; Rao and Monroe, 1988) and, thus, may feel more confident in assessing technical outcomes and questioning service providers' explanations than do novices when making decisions" (Bell and Eisingerich, 2007, p. 467). Therefore, customer evaluation skills mediate the relationship between customer education and customer perceived value. In this direction, the more customers become expert, the more they are able to: a) use a better vocabulary, with appropriate and specific technical terms; b) understand relevant aspects of a goods or service that they have to evaluate; c) have an ideal reference for how the product should be and can thus make a comparison; d) derive more meaning from a product because they possess more information about it; e) experience a learning process that is pleasant in itself; f) experience an activity that is sense making in nature; g) know better their needs; h) feel they increased their personal growth level in terms of knowledge and are consequently more expert; i) better justify to

themselves the reasons for choosing a product (preference justification); j) increase their curiosity and passion for a product; and k) develop social interactions. In addition, Ritters (2003) acknowledges that while laws and markets may change, customer education skills will enable people to move through life as effective customers. Thus:

RP9: Customer evaluation skills will affect the relationship between customer education and customer perceived value.

4. Managerial implications

Although this study is conceptual in nature, it offers a number of practical implications for managers that want to improve consumer education.

As the complexity of the marketplace grows, the importance of customer education becomes paramount (Halatin and Taylor, 1994). This paper highlights the importance for any company to educate its customers to increase their knowledge and evaluation skills in order to positively affect customer perceived value. Developing initiatives able to increase the customer's knowledge is good right because this way customer evaluation skills enhances and, as a final step, its ability to be satisfied from product consumption - either good or service. In addition, developing initiatives aimed at strengthening customer education allows companies to obtain a number of advantages, for example: a) increasing customer perceived value and, consequently, strengthening company strategies of differentiation from competitors; b) being perceived as a company concerned with their customers' benefits, as it is more open and transparent, thus applying affiliation principles and inspiring more trustworthiness (Eisingerich and Bell, 2008) and social legitimation through offering more information about product attributes, their use and providers, and production processes; c) expert customers speak more and better of the products and company through word-of-mouth and e-word-of-mouth conversations (Brunetti, 2003), and can also become brand advocates; and d) having expert customers allows a company to attract better partners for developing possible co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008 a,b; Vargo *et al.*, 2008) and collaborative innovation (Verona and Prandelli, 2006) processes and, consequently, to win at a competitive level.

In relation to this last aspect, as customer participation in service production and delivery is increasingly viewed as a source of value creation (Lengnick-Hall, 1996; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Bettencourt *et al.*, 2002), companies can effectively educate customers directly by involving them in the material goods production (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003) or service delivery (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003; Meuter *et al.*, 2005). In this way, customers can attain new knowledge and at the same time appreciate and enjoy more of their purchases. Such involvement affects customers at both the cognitive and emotional level. The direct experience makes customers active partners of their purchases, not just passive recipients.

It is also important to consider that any company has to carefully choose the education programmes (e.g., auto-education, mass education, experiential or individual education). According to Aubert and Gotteland's study (2010), any company has to segment them on the base of the initial level of customers' expertise. In addition, "not all customers require similar levels of educational support in the same service context" (Burton, 2002). Therefore, managers need to develop education initiatives mainly aimed at customers that want to satisfy their curiosity and increase their knowledge levels.

The analysis carried out highlights how managers should not only develop a number of education and communication activities but also make a cultural leap in order to educate customers. Despite this, it is not easy to find companies putting in place full and comprehensive education programmes. Easier it is to find single initiatives, however still useful and interesting. For instance, De Cecco, an Italian producer of pasta, found it necessary to disseminate some knowledge about pasta when it started to enter the Russian market.

Providing customers with a number of aspects and tools for evaluating products reduces information asymmetries between a company and its customers (Nayyar, 1990; Bell and Eisingerich, 2007). However, at least in principle, this can reduce the power of the company. Therefore, managers should consider this risk by both creating knowledge about service alternatives - because "the difference in the amount of search or sources of information considered by consumers disappears" (Venkatraman and Dholakia, 1997, p. 313) - and evaluating what information can be offered to customers for increasing their knowledge levels.

Some suggestions in order to implement a customer education program deal with its content, while others with its media. As to the former, one could think of the background of product's concept and design, its raw materials; production processes; final product; actual workers; company; country where production takes place; product usage; meta-text (when involved). As to the latter, companies can deploy several "devices" such as communication (off-line and on-line); brand community; stores; events; customers' direct involvement in the material goods production and service delivery.

5. Conclusions, limitations and directions for future research

This study focuses on the effects of customer education in terms of customer perceived value. It especially explores customer education as process feeding a number of knowledge levels, and highlights the relationships between customer education and customer perceived value mediated by customer evaluation skills. It proposes a theoretically grounded conceptual framework that can be considered a first step towards compensating for the lack of studies on customer education in the service marketing and management field.

This study is not without limitations. The methodology is for now based only on some research propositions. The model hasn't been tested and there are no definite results. Consequently, the application to management

remains rather general. In addition, despite the customer education issue is evolving quickly, the theoretical and empirical contributions about this topic within the service marketing and management literature are mostly dated.

This paper would encourage future researchers to explore this area in greater depth. To further this goal, we offer the following suggestions, which coincidentally represent further limitations of this study.

In addition to empirically testing in the future the model presented, it could be interesting to develop, and subsequently test, another model considering both cognitive and emotional dimension of the post-purchase evaluation phase.

Another promising research area is to apply this model to different product categories of (convenience and shopping) goods and (high- and low-contact) services and experiences.

It may also be relevant to consider the contribution offered to customer education initiatives by third parties such as practice communities, and examine if companies in the private and public sector can contribute in different ways to the customer education process, customer evaluation skills and perceived value.

Finally, we suggest more in-depth examination of the situations in which it is appropriate to create expert customers both by providing detailed information about product features and properties, use of products, providers and production processes, and allowing customers to actively participate in education programmes and to feel more involved in the company's activities.

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