Methods of Investigating Critical Incidents

A Comparative Review

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The methods used for analyzing customer relationships have traditionally focused exclusively on service encounters. Recently, researchers have presented these service encounters as a flow or process, although without taking time into account. Both of these perspectives on customer relationships have provided the means for developing a process-based method that does take time into account. This makes it possible to analyze and describe a customer relationship in which effects and consequences can be represented and the influenced and influencing factors prioritized. Given that the domain for analyzing the customer relationship is a switch from one service provider to another, the consequence is clear. The switch is identical to the consequence. The consequence, again, defines the criticality. Criticality and context are key concepts in the search for a deeper understanding of customer relationships, and efforts are made to include them in the development of the methods put forward in this article.

Customer relationships in services are potentially profitable sources of learning for service providers when they are properly handled and understood. Customer relationships are not all the same. The intensity of personal contact between firms and customers is one aspect that differs, and visit frequency is another. Relationships between customers and service providers today seem, at first glance, to have an inferred nature other than that characterized by face-to-face encounters. Incessant technical development is pushing the core of the encounters in a product- and speed-centered direction in industries such as telecommunications and retail banking, for example (Edvardsson and Roos forthcoming; Meuter et al. 2000; Sumner-Smith and Sumner 1999).

The risk of losing customers in these industries is increasing, while the need to secure repeat purchasing and loyal customers is still an important factor in profitable business (Reichheld and Schefter 2000). Regardless of the new technology that is used both to control and to support service encounters, the need for service providers to understand customer relationships lives on as long as the needs of customers drive long-lasting relationships (Gremler 2000; Rust and Oliver 2000). Technological improvements in services may increase the tendency for customers not to tolerate inconsistency or mediocrity, and changes in uniform and regular services may lead to switching behavior (Keaveney 1995; Roos 1996, 1999a, 1999b). As a consequence, switching reasons are likely to be different than in relationships in which sales people and customers meet and deliberate in interaction. Lost customers still weaken the revenues of the firm (Storbacka, Strandvik, and Grönroos 1994; Reichheld 1996; Rust and Oliver 2000). Therefore, when the critical issues change and cause switching, it is important to understand the relationships to be able to keep track of them and to reconsider the process.

Developments in methods for understanding customer relationships have not kept up with the need to understand them. The importance of developing, maintaining, and

understanding relationships (Berry 1983; Grönroos 1996), and of broadening views on them (Gummesson 1995; Jackson 1985), seems to be eased by increasing the understanding of their criticality through methodological adjustment. Although research has increasingly moved away from focusing on service encounters toward an approach in which the entire customer relationship is considered (Liljander and Strandvik 1995), the developmental trend with respect to critical incidents has otherwise not been consistent with the development of the techniques. Even though customer relationships have been the focal point for many years, service encounters have continued to serve as the domain with respect to critical incidents. However, critical incidents and the criticality for the relationships may not totally match. Therefore, the new approach represented by relationships may benefit from the use of other and partially new methods.

In other words, the criticality of the relationship may be influenced not only by the service encounter but also by the context, which includes competitor and customer willingness and ability to adapt to changes. The context extends the critical incident in many directions. The most important condition in the relationship approach, however, is that the customer defines the relationship (Taylor et al. 2001). The need for new methods could also be expressed as a need for a customer-initiated definition of the relationship. First, then, the approach and the method are congruent. The location of the retail bank, for example, may lose significance in the new economy, whereas other aspects of the service, such as accessibility combined with site design on the Internet, and trustworthiness, grow in importance (Reichheld and Schefter 2000). Customers' actual behavior is a reliable indicator of relationship criticality and forms the domain in efforts to deepen understanding about not only attracting customers but also keeping them. Criticality is thus viewed in a switching perspective.

The purposes of this study are to review the critical-incident techniques used in the past, to describe a method that is appropriate for examining customer relationships, to demonstrate what this method provides, and to suggest areas for future research.

BACKGROUND

Many researchers have concentrated on critical incidents in services (Bitner 1990; Edvardsson 1988, 1992; Keaveney 1995; Roos 1996, 1999a, 1999b; Stauss 1993; Stauss and Hentschel 1992; Strandvik and Liljander 1994). Customer-experienced critical incidents have properties that enable valuable information about relationships between service providers and their customers to be stored. Because of what is known in the research as "criti-

cality," these incidents make it possible to distinguish what is nonessential to the specific customer who relates the incident from what is essential and significant. The literature describes both positive and negative critical incidents, and incidents have also been considered in terms of customer satisfaction in that they are ascribed properties that, in certain cases, produce dissatisfaction or satisfaction or have no impact on the satisfaction experience (Cadotte and Turgeon 1988a, 1988b; Johnston 1995; Silvestro and Johnston 1992).

Recently, critical incidents have been considered in the context of modern technology and in customer interactions with it. One example is the effect of technology and the Internet in terms of raised bars for retail outlets (Lucas 1999; Mattson 2000). Customers avoid critical incidents that involve personal interactions with employees by using the Internet and e-commerce. According to Lucas (1999), fierce competition has enabled customers to act in a more demanding way in their interaction with service providers. The reason for this is suggested to stem from the shift of power from the service provider to the customer due to the increased abundance of choice. This development also has implications for the study of critical incidents. As customer behavior changes, the findings become difficult to compare. This requires a new approach to critical-incident studies. Focus on criticality in a relationship perspective may ease and improve the degree of comparability in critical-incident studies over time.

Criticality may be defined as being based on at least two considerations. First, a critical incident may have significance within the customer relationship such that the customer refers to it in an interview in which he or she is asked to identify incidents. In such cases, the critical element could be ascribed to criticality related to memory. Second, a critical incident may have consequences for the customer relationship in that it affects customer behavior (Edvardsson and Strandvik 2000). When criticality is connected to actual behavior, the consequence is clear, but memory connected to the behavior needs to be taken into consideration to enhance reliability (Edvardsson and Roos 2001). Thereafter, the boundaries of the criticality become interesting. Customers' ways of expressing the criticality in combination with their actual behavior may support a broader definition of the relationship. Accordingly, a method for analyzing and describing the criticality of customer relationships may not concentrate on critical incidents in a traditional way.

The Traditional Critical-Incident Technique

Critical incidents have been used extensively in service quality and management literature. They are defined as interaction incidents, which the customer perceives or re-

members as unusually positive or negative when asked about them. Customers recall them and tell them as stories (Flanagan 1954; Stauss 1993). Typically, researchers have focused on finding the most frequent service quality dimensions or determinants by using traditional content analysis. Stauss and Hentschel (1992) compared a quantitative attribute-based measurement approach to studying service quality with findings from a parallel critical-incident study and concluded that these methods give different results. The attribute-oriented approach captures routine aspects of service quality, whereas the critical-incident technique gives a view of nonroutine quality. To understand predictable and training-adaptive behavior in work settings, for example, Pulakos et al. (2000) described an eight-dimensional taxonomy of adaptive performance. An additional application field is the examination of problems of violence in the retail industry (Licata 2000). A service-encounter focus is most appropriate in the studies referred to above.

Meuter et al. (2000) discussed both modern technology and the quantification of connections between concepts in their study on discerning sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with self-service technologies (SST). Moreover, they point out the ultimate use of traditional critical-incident techniques in finding qualitative categories in combination with quantitative measures to bring out information related to the incident. They linked measures of attribution, complaining, and future behavior to the qualitative categories included in their study. Their findings confirm that the technology used in SST satisfies through time saving and ease of use, whereas failures result in dissatisfied customers. Their use of the critical-incident technique justifies the service-encounter focus, and the diversified approach involving both linking and finding causal connections gives their results pride of place in critical-incident studies.

Olsen's Technique

Olsen (1992, 1996) introduced the dynamic approach to critical incidents by describing both critical acts and critical episodes (service encounters) in a customer relationship. He described various service encounters in detail and then showed which elements of the interaction between customer and staff members were critical to the customer relationship. The ways in which these interactions develop in various directions, depending on the response received by the customer in various interactive situations, can then be determined. These results are important to the continued development of the use of critical incidents, in that they indicate and describe trigger factors that may precede either a strong or a weakened customer relationship. However, the service-encounter approach focuses

strongly on the immediate outcome of the critical incident. Consequently, Olsen contributed more to our understanding of the dynamic aspects of the relationship than to the long-term impact of the critical incidents.

The Sequential Incident Technique

This technique (Stauss and Weinlich 1995, 1997) describes how the customer is allowed to relate a specific transaction, known as a customer process, in a customer relationship and thus also include normal service encounters with critical service encounters (Liljander and Strandvik 1995). This way of expanding on the critical-incident approach provides a better understanding of what leads a customer to be more or less satisfied with a customer relationship. Once the points of the specific satisfaction-producing interactions (subservice encounters, service contacts, or contact points) have been identified, they can be analyzed and compared with areas in which dissatisfaction arises among customers.

The variants of the critical-incident technique described above represent advances in how the dynamics of and disparities in critical incidents are analyzed and described. The consequence is taken into account in the form of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Behavior is not taken into account as a direct consequence in the form of actual behavior, but it is considered to some extent in the form of behavioral intentions. The switching path analysis technique (SPAT), which is described in the next section, makes a contribution in that it is based on a distinct consequence of the critical incident as described by the customer.

SPAT

Definition

The use of SPAT as a research tool for describing and analyzing customer relationships offers the following advantages: (a) the user takes advantage of the information stored within critical incidents, (b) the customer determines the criteria for describing the customer relationship, (c) time is described as a process, and (d) the customer relates his or her actual behavior. The last-mentioned advantage provides a real opportunity to determine whether the incident—something that happened in the context of the relationship or a situational factor—was in fact critical to the customer relationship, that is, if it caused the customer to switch service providers. It could also be said that the customer is given the opportunity to include the context that was relevant to the specific situation surrounding the incident. In comparison with critical-incident techniques, all of which describe one or more incidents, only SPAT is

based on actual behavior in a relationship view, thereby making it possible to ensure that customer behavior is included as a consequence of criticality within a relationship, including the context.

SPAT is defined as a method that is based not only on critical incidents but also on the criticality of the relationship, the switching path leading from the trigger to the relationship switch. The switching path represents the time during the relationship that, according to the customer, affected the switching decision. The identification of the trigger reveals the nature of the switching path with all its implications in terms of switching determinants. It becomes clear through understanding the nature of the catalytic switching path that the trigger makes the customer sensitive to the switching determinant. It gives the switching path energy and direction. Labeling the determinant in terms of price, location, and personnel is not important as such in the configuration. It is the dynamism of the switching path—the change over time connected to the trigger—that matters. In other words, when a customer expresses price as a switching determinant, it is a perceived determinant that is connected to the trigger in a particular configuration. This realization provides an answer to the question of why a switching path starts when it does. It is not the switching determinant that is the decisive factor, it is the trigger, which gives energy and direction. The trigger provides the direction, and the switching determinant gives the performance.

SPAT thus bridges a number of developmental gaps that were present between existing critical-incident techniques. This does not mean that this development process is complete in terms of focusing on critical incidents but simply that some overlooked criteria have been met whereas others remain unfulfilled.

Methodology and Findings
in Two Empirical Studies

The interviews in question were analyzed using SPAT. This article mentions only the aspects that impinged on the relationship view and facilitated comparison with other critical-incident techniques. The interviews were analyzed by focusing on triggers, switching determinants, and consequences. The catalytic nature of the switching path is depicted in Figure 1. In other words, triggers influence switching processes throughout and may be situational, influential, or reactional. Both the switched-from and switched-to service providers are included on the path, which is moved along by switching determinants distinguished by their dynamic characteristics and named pushers, swayers, and pullers. The technique is described in more detail in the next section and demonstrated by the findings of the study.

FIGURE 1
Switching Path Analysis Technique
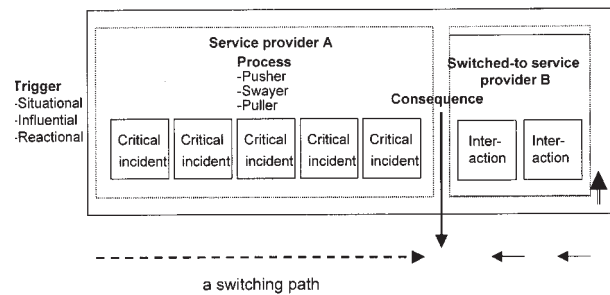
SOURCE: Roos (1999a, p. 130).

The findings reported in this study are based on two different empirical studies. A national retail bank in Finland and an international telecommunications company in Sweden provided information about customers with decreased activity on their bank accounts and less use of telecommunications, respectively. The lists obtained from the bank contained 550 customers, 35 of whom were interviewed and 22 included in the report. Of the total sample of 1,150 telecommunications customers, 317 were contacted by telephone, 95 were interviewed, and 64 were included in the report. The customers were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in an interview about their switching behavior. The interviews lasted between 12 and 25 minutes, and they were taped, transcribed, and analyzed. They were all conducted and analyzed partly by the author and partly by an assistant with a master's degree in marketing.

TRIGGER

When SPAT is used for analysis, the customer relationship is broken down into a trigger, an initial stage, a process, and a consequence. These various components perform different functions along the same switching path. The trigger has a catalytic nature, rendering the customer susceptible to switching. This means that it feeds and gives direction to the entire switching process without actually being a visible part of it. Three different types of trigger have been identified:

- Situational Trigger
- Influential Trigger
- Reactional Trigger

A situational trigger consists of a change in the customer's situation outside of the customer relationship per se. Consideration must be given to where the boundaries of

the customer relationship are to be drawn. As far as SPAT is concerned, anything that actively affects customer behavior within the customer relationship is considered part of the relationship. Different changes may act as situational triggers:

- Altered work hours
- Altered financial circumstances
- Use of spare time
- Changes in mobility (car, local means of conveyance)
- Demographic changes

In the telecommunications context, the customers described a switching path that derived its energy from a situational trigger as follows:

I have switched my ISP [Internet service provider] because of poor customer support; I still have my telephone with my old telecom company, it seems comfortable and reliable.
We changed to another ISP. We are keeping our telephone with our old telecom company, just out of habit. We can't be bothered doing price comparisons.

Bank customers experiencing a situational trigger made the following statements:

I had had an account at my old bank practically since the day I was born; I'd been a customer for about 38 years. I switched banks when I was offered really good terms on a mortgage from another bank. I still handle some of my banking at my old bank over the Internet; they have a better Web page and Internet system than my new bank does. However, today I mostly handle my mother's banking at my old bank.
When I needed a mortgage I got better terms at another bank. I've gradually switched over to the new bank more and more. I'm currently using my old bank for a savings account. They pay higher interest than the other one, but it's quite small. You never know what the fact that it is a small bank might mean in the future.

A situational trigger is often linked to the customer's private life, which is why it is extremely important to allow him or her to speak freely during the interview, so that the maximum amount of information can come to light.

An influential trigger occurs when the service provider to which the customer switches serves as a standard of comparison. The typical situation is one in which a new service provider tries to penetrate a market. The new company persuades customers to try their services, and the customers begin to compare their old company with the new one. An influential trigger might consist of the following:

- A competing company
- A the new company's concept
- A new payment method (credit card)

The influential trigger in a customer relationship between a telecom company and its customers typically appeared as follows:

I switched to a competitor, but after a while their prices started to go up and down. My old telecom company maintains somewhat more consistent pricing; it's like it's more reliable. It's also problematic to be getting two phone bills. I get a bill every month from the competitor, and another every 3 months from my old company. That makes it hard to compare prices.
I make an awful lot of calls to Australia and Croatia, which is where my children live. I had indeed planned on switching over to a competitor; I got their price information off the Internet. I'm still using my old telecom company for local calls. I haven't switched my ISP, I don't know how to do that. I haven't complained to my old company; I have nothing against them, it's just the price.

Bank customers who had been influenced by other customers or some other factor, such as an advertising campaign, made the following statements:

When I had to take out a business loan from another bank about 10 years ago, it gradually led me to switch everything over to the new bank. I was also getting tired of standing in line, although I don't know whether it was any worse at my old bank than anywhere else. It was more a case of later taking out private loans where I already had security. The new bank was always running ads that attracted me.
I was living abroad, and as a result I hadn't used my account much for a while. I'm completely satisfied with my old bank, they really handled everything smoothly while I was away. I can make comparisons because my husband uses a different bank. I'm not as convinced when it comes to investment services.

Switching paths with influential triggers are usually the most common. As a result, it is sometimes necessary to sort these paths into a number of categories. However, this process is highly industry specific, as will become apparent during the analysis.

A reactional trigger influences the customer's susceptibility to switching as a result of a change within the company. This change may consist of a drop in the quality of the products or services compared with past performance by the same company, or it could be associated with organizational changes. Inconsistent or variable quality could also serve as a trigger throughout all recurrent drops in

customer-quality perceptions. A reactional trigger might consist of one or more of the following:

- Inconsistent quality
- Reduced quality
- Unsuccessful reorganization within the company
- A prolonged revamping process resulting in inconvenient solutions for the customer
- The introduction of a new computer system that does not work

Customers whose switching paths derive their energy from a reactional trigger are generally easy to categorize and constitute an obvious customer segment. Typical comments about the telecom company were as follows:

> I don't want to get bills from a bunch of different companies. I had everything with my old company: two cell phones, a normal telephone, e-mail, the Internet. What's holding me back is that no other operator offers net access. I've had problems with static on the line ever since there was a lightening strike last summer. They didn't believe me; if they dig up the line and don't find anything, I have to pay for everything myself. As a result, I don't dare have them do it.
> They changed my Internet password without letting me know, as far as I could tell. I was really put out.
> My old telecom company's customer support on the Internet was really inconsistent. Their homepage is also the slowest around.

A reactional trigger in a banking context might look somewhat different. It is thus important to be aware of the definitions of the various triggers and to apply them to the specific industry being researched. The following statements were obtained from interviews with bank customers:

> I needed a loan, and got better terms at another bank. I never heard from my own bank while the loan was being negotiated. I think that my new bank has more convenient payment systems, but I'm not really sure how they worked at my old bank either. The basic differences in the loan terms were significant, and no one asked me about them.
> What triggered everything was when I had to take out a loan to build a house. I was always paying such high interest; I complained about that a lot both at my office and "in town." When I was offered better terms at another bank, I switched. They wouldn't even discuss terms or interest rates at my old bank, where I had been a customer for 30 years. It finally got so that I didn't even want to go into the bank, because they just laughed at my attempts to get better terms.

PROCESS

The trigger portion of the switching process affects the entire switching path, with the process being the visible part. It is this part that is generally described when a customer is observed or interviewed. The process could be said to advance the path toward the switch, whereas the path derives its energy and direction from the trigger. When the information provided by the customer is presented as a process, it becomes possible to obtain a highly nuanced picture of the customer relationship. These dynamics and nuances take the form of three different types of switching determinants:

- A pusher determinant that the customer gives as the reason for the switch
- A swayer determinant that may be either positive or negative, which as a result may either shorten or prolong the switching process
- A puller determinant that brings the customer back to the service provider that he or she left, which applies in cases in which the customer has only partially switched providers

It is evident from the foregoing that it is not possible to designate different determinants in the form of parameters such as status, price level, or service quality in the sense that they represent only one type of switching determinant that would distinguish customer behavior on the path. The switching-determinant parameters depend on the industry in question, and conversely, categorization is carried out according to the given definitions. However, if customers are divided into segments based on their switching behavior, the determinants distinguish the segments regarding customers' expressions on the path. Three segments are presented grouped according to the triggers. The differences between the different switching determinants in their role of moving the switching path along are also indicated.

The categorization of customers in three different segments depicted in Table 1 is based on their switching behavior and is focused on fairly different switching-path factors. If the context of their relationships had been included and expressed as actual switching behavior, the focus would most likely have been too narrow to add to our understanding of customer relationships. From a switching perspective, keeping customers seems to involve more than meeting the needs that constituted the direct switching reasons in the form of pushers. Furthermore, regardless of these clearly expressed switching reasons (pushers), customers have needs that are hidden behind swayers, pullers, and triggers and that reveal the nature of the relationship.

TABLE 1
Customer Segments

Switching Determinant	Situation Customers	Influence Customers	Reaction Customers

Pusher	Inflexibility	Price
		    Rate of interest
		    Telephone call price
			Service Quality
			    Personnel
			    Customer support

Swayer (+) Swayer (−)	Product improvement (+)	Competitor (−) Personnel (+)	Personnel (−) Personnel (+)
Puller	Confidence	Price	
Segment characteristics	Customers requiring flexibility and understanding concerning dynamism and needs	Price-sensitive customers; frequent switchers	Committed and loyal customers; total switchers

CONSEQUENCES OF A CRITICAL INCIDENT

The consequences of the switching process may be either a total switch or a partial switch. If the customer switches totally, then at the time of the interview, he or she has no intention of switching back to the abandoned service provider. If the switch is partial, then the buying pattern changes so that the shared components are altered in the set of service providers used by the customer.

The consequence or result of the switching process thus depends on which trigger created the switching path and what kind of switch (total or partial) occurred. This means that a pattern will emerge, depending on the trigger. Generally speaking, situation- and influence-triggered switching processes often result in a change in only buying patterns, whereas a reaction-based process often results in a total switch. This is due to the fact that the customer reacts more strongly to the latter in that he or she complains and exhibits relatively strong emotions in connection with the switch. In addition, a total switching process is usually of shorter duration than one in which only the buying pattern is altered.

The majority of the retail-banking customers were influenced by the influential trigger, although both situational and reactional triggers were also represented in the sample. Influence dominated the telecommunications customers, however, and only a few were on paths influenced by situational and reactional triggers. Fierce competition causes service providers to advertise heavily and to use other ways of attracting customers in the short term to make them switch and try a competitor.

DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis

The differences between the various critical-incident technique variants described in this article are illustrated in Table 2. The most decisive difference pertains to the do-

main used. SPAT represents the technique in which the domain is the customer relationship and is thus to be found simultaneously in the consequence and the switch. The other variants are based on service encounters, a flow of service encounters, or a sequence (Stauss and Weinlich 1995, 1997) drawn from a customer relationship. Even though service encounters in the customer relationship have served as the domain, the consequences have been derived in terms of both the strength of the relationship and any potential future breakdown. The provision of a variant (SPAT) in which the customer relationship serves as the domain makes it possible to compare them all. Such a comparison provides a new domain for developing the technique by clarifying what is essential with respect to criticality when the focus is on the customer relationship. New knowledge could thus also be applied to variants that focus on elements of the customer relationship other than its termination. The table shows the development of critical-incident techniques from the static, service-encounter-based variant (i.e., the traditional technique) toward more customer-relationship-based models in which a dynamic switching path is described. The result is determined directly by who is questioned, how they are questioned, and what it is possible to ask. The choice of technique depends on whether the results are to be described statically, as a flow, or as a process.

The traditional critical-incident technique can be used to advantage when the focus is statically on critical incidents. The customer relates an incident, which is analyzed, and properties based on such incidents are categorized in a meaningful way. This is known as the static approach (Bitner 1990; Johnston 1995; Keaveney 1995).

When critical incidents are arranged in the order in which they naturally occur within an industry, they are arranged in a flow. The traditional critical-incident technique is also applicable in such cases. When a service is divided into subservices, incidents that are referable to the various interaction points within the company are identifiable. For example, such interaction occurs in transportation services such as ticket purchasing, waiting times,

TABLE 2
Variants of the Critical-Incident Technique

Data Gathering	Traditional Critical-Incident Technique	Olsen	Sequential Incident Technique	Switching Path Analysis Technique
What the study Includes	Service encounters; subservice encounters	Service encounter; subservice encounters	Service encounter; sequences of subservice encounter	Service encounter; terminated and new customer relationships
Interview content	Questions concerning critical incidents	Follow-up process questions	Questions concerning sequences and subservice encounter	Follow-up questions concerning previous and new customer relationships (switching path)
Study focus	Critical subservice encounter (critical incidents)	Critical subservice encounter in a service encounter; process in a service encounter	Critical subservice encounter in a sequence of subservice encounter	Switch from one customer relationship to another
Results	Typologies of critical incidents; determinants	Determinants; typology of service encounters and microprocesses	Service encounters that elicit satisfaction/dissatisfaction in a customer process	Dynamism in switching paths
Focus on the customer relationship	Service encounter	Service encounter	Sequence	Customer relationship; critical service encounter in their context

actual travel, and getting on and off the bus. The critical incidents may be applied to these interaction points or subservices as they occur naturally, without the customer's having to describe the entire process. It is then possible to see where the most positive and negative incidents occur, as presented in their "natural environment" (Edvardsson and Luukkonen 1996).

When the customer relates a specific customer process and describes both positive and negative incidents therein, a sequence from a customer relationship is being described. A special variant of the critical-incident technique known as sequential incident technique has been formulated for such purposes. The difference between describing critical incidents in a flow and describing them in a sequence lies in the data-gathering process. In a traditional flow description, customers need not describe a sequence but only relate the critical incident that occurred during it. When the customer relates a sequence, he or she must describe it in its entirety regardless of how the critical incidents occurred; time must be taken into account (Stauss and Weinlich 1995, 1997).

Figure 2 provides examples of studies in which the critical-incident techniques presented and compared above have been applied. The traditional technique has been frequently and successfully used in different kinds of studies. However, when the approach tends toward the relationship perspective, other and new variants may be preferable. Figure 2 describes the conditions for such applications according to existing literature. It shows how the view of underlying marketing research is proceeding from service encounters to relationships related to critical-incident technique applications. In other words, the lighter shaded areas on the left represent the static approach and behavior as intention, and the darker areas on the right represent actual behavior.

When critical-incident techniques are developed in a relationship direction, the context seems to be important because of the nature of the incident, which may stem from various combinations of processual motives energizing the behavior. In other words, moving from actual behavior to behavioral intentions and including the context of the critical incident may thus also help future researchers to broaden their understanding of behavior.

When the entire customer relationship is represented as a process, customers describe the relationship as it can be recalled from memory. The customer relationship is the domain, but time has affected it and both history and memory are taken into account. The process form is maintained in that time is considered, and the various factors are described in terms of their impact on one another, which Olsen (1992, 1996) did in focusing on the detached service encounter. There are many different types of process, which differ from one another in that the factors involved exert their influence or are influenced in accordance with a very particular pattern. When a process is described as a catalytic process, one of the factors affects the entire process in a decisive manner for as long as it is active. This type of process serves as the basis for describing and analyzing critical incidents using SPAT (Roos 1999a). SPAT further assumes actual behavior, which constitutes an important factor in terms of the conclusions that can be drawn for current relationships as well.

FIGURE 2
Guidance Through CIT Variants

Critical Incidents and Criticality

As the developmental trend in the research has shifted toward a focus on customer relationships, new demands have been imposed in terms of how the results are interpreted, analyzed, and presented. This also applies to a large extent to techniques that are based on critical incidents. A unique situation arises when the focus is on critical incidents and behavior. One precondition for being able to evaluate previously used variants of critical-incident techniques and to compare them with one another is that the comparisons should be made with techniques in which the focus is coincident in terms of behavior. SPAT represents a method in which the domain consists of the customer relationship or, more specifically, one customer relationship that is replaced by another. Insight into what the problem areas will be when behavioral intentions need to be predicted can be obtained by carefully mapping the advantages gained by keeping the focus on actual behavior when analyzing and representing the customer relationship. When the focus is on the relationship between these two, the requirements for a critical-incident technique for analyzing and predicting behavior become clearer.

SPAT AND CRITICAL-INCIDENT TECHNIQUES

When critical incidents are considered from a relationship perspective, the criticality becomes the main issue because it concerns the question of relationship stability. The extremes of customer stability are seen in terms of staying or leaving. The criticality related to an ongoing relationship may be different than when the customer has left. One key difference is in customer behavior related to expressed criticality. Customer relationships and the relationship view are considered in terms of maintenance and development involving the underlying conditions behind long-term and customer-focused relationships. When relationships are switched, customers simultaneously define the criticality in terms of actual behavior. We could learn more by encouraging customers to further define the context and include the aspects and factors that are decisive in terms of actual behavior. SPAT is a technique that could be used for assisting customers in their definition efforts.

It could be argued that a method that describes and analyzes a customer-defined relationship should not be included in the critical-incident technique family. The reasoning behind such an argument is that although the context is included in the definition of the relationship, clear and separate negative incidents do not always exist. The trigger function of SPAT embeds one part of the criticality formed as the context of the ultimate relationship, while the process both confirms the criticality on one hand and mitigates it on the other. The weight of the relationship dynamism thus offers new potential for a deeper understanding of customer relationships. In other words, criticality in customer relationships analyzed by using SPAT does not focus on particular critical incidents. The reasons for switching between service providers is rather tracked and described as a process.

Further Research

Continued development of the technique thus requires an emphasis on how memory, decision making, and behavior are linked. Discussing and relating empirical studies to the existing literature, mainly in psychology, to construct a frame of reference, may provide answers concerning the extent to which it is possible to address actual behavior by focusing on criticality in current relationships. A critical incident is not an end point; it is merely something that produces different behaviors depending on the context in which it has occurred. Thus, it is not enough to focus solely on the incident; the context is also extremely important in determining our ability to predict future behavior in customer relationships.

Taylor (1991) supported this view. It follows that it cannot automatically be assumed that a critical incident has been the cause of anything in terms of behavior. The consequences become clearer when it is considered in context. Studies involving only negative critical incidents deepen our understanding of the link between customer decisions and the impact that the critical incidents have on such decisions in the form of behavior. The negative incidents are put in context in a multifactor process. As long as behavioral intentions are considered to be related to how critical incidents affect the customer relationship, then memory, decision making, and the significance of the behavior will have a major impact on the reliability of our estimations. The fact that these problems have not been elucidated previously means that a technique that takes into account the ways in which they are related to one another can make a clear contribution to this research.

Behavior is a key factor when it comes to developing methods for measuring criticality in which SPAT is the closest reference point. It would appear to be important to clarify memory and how it affects decision making in relation to behavior. A process with catalytic properties is the most relevant if SPAT is used as the starting point for further development. Therefore, as the findings of this article suggest, further research could follow two main streams:

1. Quantitative generalization of actual switching behavior based on SPAT
2. Assessment of criticality related to intended behavior

Implied in the first suggestion are a few essential problematic sources for method development. When criticality

is defined in terms of the context of the relationship and the dynamism of the switching process, model building requires reflection of the key catalytic nature because only then will the understanding that is achieved through SPAT applications remain and form a basis for further development and new findings.

The second course of research follows the pattern related to criticality and intended behavior in a relationship view. The main point here is to ensure the mechanism between customer expressions of behavior as intentions related to the probability of actual behavior. A first step on this path would be to examine how planned behavior in connection with critical incidents is stored in the memory and used for future actual behavior that turns out to be critical for the relationship. Framework building following "the intention path" is suggested by Edvardsson and Roos (2001) in response to these questions.

The specific characteristics of the industry in question play a major role in behavior prediction. Customers react in different ways, depending largely on how much value the customer relationship has to them (Ravald and Grönroos 1996). The compensation process that occurs in the customer relationship between positive and negative critical incidents also has a part to play. It still seems that certain negative critical incidents are crucial in predicting the evolution of a weakened customer relationship toward a switch. These negative critical incidents are related to the decisions made by the customer in connection with the original incident. When a customer decides upon some future behavior, his or her memory images become clearer and more accessible (Hastie and Park 1986; Taylor 1991). This entails an increased risk of future switching. The importance of how earlier critical incidents were experienced is thereby increased, and the focus in the earlier incidents is an important factor in predicting behavior with a relatively high degree of certainty (Guo and Tseng 1997). Empirical studies have shown that some customer segments are more disposed to making such decisions for themselves than others (Edvardsson and Roos forthcoming). Therefore, it is important to achieve a deepened understanding of customer relationships before the discussion moves on.

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