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The Influence of Behavioral Beliefs on
Satisfied and Affectively Committed Clients' Referral Intentions

Abstract

Sometimes called recommendations, referrals represent positive word of mouth (WOM) that existing clients share with potential customers. Referrals serve as important marketing communication, both for organizations and consumers. Professional service providers often rely heavily on referrals for promotion, and consumers frequently seek referrals for particular service needs. A literature review reveals that clients are most likely to give referrals when they are satisfied with the service they receive and when they have an emotional attachment to their service provider. *Satisfaction* and *affective commitment*, therefore, are two key prerequisites for client referral-giving.

Still, experience suggests that not all satisfied and affectively committed clients offer referrals. The reasons for this nonperformance have been unclear. Given the reliance of many organizations on referrals and the unlikelihood of receiving recommendations from clients who are not satisfied and affectively committed, this dissertation has posed an important question: *Why do some clients who are satisfied and affectively committed fail to offer referrals?*

In exploring this question, this study employed a framework from social psychology, Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, which led to the development of three testable hypotheses. A sample was chosen consisting of clients of public accounting firms, and structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze data collected through a web-based survey.

First, the study found evidence that satisfied and affectively committed clients had stronger intentions to give referrals than did other clients. In addition, satisfied and affectively committed clients' negative attitudes toward giving referrals were discovered

to be a significant predictor of their lack of intention to refer their accounting firm to acquaintances. Clients' perceptions of limited control over giving referrals also emerged as a particularly strong indicator of diminished referral intent. No evidence was found, however, to support a relationship between intentions to refer and normative beliefs, or clients' perceptions of others' views about referral-giving.