

CUSTOMERS' BEHAVIOURAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE SERVICE ENCOUNTER

Iliana Katsaridou and Alan Wilson

University of Strathclyde Business School, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that customers can contribute to creating a positive and equally gratifying encounter for both parties in an interaction by engaging in specific behaviours directed towards the service personnel. Based on the assumption that the employee's behaviour during the service encounter can often come as a response to the customer's prior behaviour and therefore can be more reciprocal and reactive in nature, this paper examines customer supportive behaviour as an antecedent to employees' subsequent behavioural outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Service encounter, customer behaviour, service employee behaviour

BACKGROUND

The service encounter is characterized by its dyadic and interactive nature (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987) and therefore, the service employee's and the customer's behaviours are interdependent, in that one party's activity affects, and is affected by, the other party's activity (Ma and Dubé, 2011). In this view, the service outcome essentially arises from the coordinated efforts of customers and service employees during the service encounter (Mills and Morris, 1986).

Towards this end, service employees accomplish their role by endeavouring to comply with organizationally prescribed rules in terms of their expected behaviour when interacting with their customers (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). On the other hand, customers too have the ability to provide emotional and instrumental resources to the service encounter through their behaviour towards service employees (Garma and Bove, 2011; Zimmermann et al., 2011). In a way, this is implicitly expected by service employees as their behavioural effort to deliver a service requires reciprocal responses from the customers (Brotheridge and Lee, 2002). As such, employee behaviour towards customers is not always employee-specific and thereby executed by the employee alone, but is frequently interaction-induced and therefore corresponds to the behaviour received previously by the customer (Van Dolen et al., 2004). However, empirical studies examining the role of customers as contributors to the service encounter have more or less produced mixed results (Groth, 2005) while little is known about the effects of customer behaviours on employee-related outcomes (Rodie and Kleine, 2000; Yi and Gong, 2012; Yim et al., 2012). As such, the so far lacking conceptualization of the service encounter through the theoretical lens of social exchange theory and equity theory suggests that when customers engage in voluntary, instrumentally or emotionally supportive behaviour, a reciprocal exchange of similar behaviour between the interacting parties should be established.

METHODOLOGY

Two research stages were conducted among service employees from the restaurant industry in order to capture a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. The selected context allows for multiple customer contact points and is characterized by its highly interactive nature. In addition, the labour-intensive environment of a full-service restaurant renders the impact of customer supportive behaviour on employee subsequent behaviour more salient. Stage one comprised of a qualitative interview procedure employing the critical incident technique. The aim of this initial phase was threefold: a) to identify customer behaviours which benefit service employees while performing their role of delivering the service; b) to capture the service employee emotional states and experience as it was shaped following beneficial customer behaviours and c) to determine whether a mechanism of reciprocal exchange of benefits was established following customer positive behaviour.

Stage two consisted of the distribution of an online survey instrument with a scenario-based experimental design which aimed at validating the preliminary findings of the exploratory phase at an aggregate level. The questionnaire design involved the use of previously validated

measures for all constructs. Questionnaire data was collected from waiting personnel of full service restaurants in Greece and empirical analysis was undertaken that led to a holistic outline of customers' behavioural contribution to the service encounter along with the associated employee behavioural responses towards these customers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of both studies advance our understanding of how customer roles positively influence employee service experience and provide new insights with regards to the service employee and customer interface. The findings represent an initial empirical attempt to formulate and test a framework that examines customer roles in terms of shaping their service encounter through their own behaviour. The lack of research examining the impact of the customers' positive behaviour on service employees' experience and behaviours is surprising given that customer supportive, unsolicited actions have a direct effect on the experience of service employees but also an indirect impact on several positive organizational outcomes. The study therefore adds to the existing literature by helping to clarify the ways that service employees respond to this customer supportive behaviour.

Both studies indicate that customers can direct emotionally and instrumentally supportive behaviour towards the service employees during the service encounter. And as customers are willing to go the extra mile when in face of service employees' discretionary behaviour, the same situation applies when the service personnel is the direct recipient of the customers' beneficial behaviours. This suggests that the exchanges between contact employees and customers can be more symmetrical, balanced and thus jointly rewarding, once the latter engage in specific positive behaviours directed towards the service personnel.

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