

Customers' Role in Delivering Enhanced Service Outcomes

Iliana Katsaridou and Alan Wilson

University of Strathclyde Business School, UK

Research in the field of services has been flourishing over the past years, with a particular stream being dedicated to the examination of the service employee-customer interface. In view of this, an argument can be made that for the most part, studies examining the interpersonal dynamics of the service encounter process have been focusing on deconstructing negative exchanges between the two parties, while a wealth of research has been mainly adopting the customer's viewpoint in order to identify practices for achieving customer gratification. Notwithstanding these scholarly contributions, recent calls have been made for attention to be brought to the 'bright side' of the service encounter with an explicit focus on the service employee perspective, suggesting that such an angle in the study of the service exchange could yield significant insights for academics and practitioners alike.

This paper addresses this identified gap by adopting the service employee standpoint and by arguing that customers too can contribute to fostering a positive and equally gratifying encounter for both parties in the 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 beneficial behaviour as an antecedent to service employees' subsequent favourable behavioural outcomes.

Two sequential research stages were implemented in order to shed light on the impact of customer beneficial behaviour to the service encounter. Results from a qualitative interview procedure followed by a scenario-based experimental survey design among service employees indicated that customers can voluntarily act in a beneficial manner, which is subsequently translated into valued resources by service employees. These resources in turn are likely to enhance the service outcome received by all interested parties.

Hence, despite the previous acknowledgement of the customer as a causal variable affecting service outcomes, past service research has excluded the customer's role in the dual process of the service encounter. This research contributes to the service encounter literature by adopting a resource-based view of the exchange process, and by applying role theory and social exchange theory to demonstrate how customer beneficial behaviour mediates the outcome of the overall service encounter. As such, it is proposed that exchanges between service 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.