

# DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS: A TENSION BETWEEN SERVICE ORIENTATION IDEALS AND DAILY FRONT LINE WORK

**Markus Felleson**, Service Research Center (CTF), Karlstad University, Sweden

**Nicklas Salomonson**, University of Borås, Sweden

## INTRODUCTION

Service orientation has been defined as “an individual’s willingness to treat coworkers and customers with courtesy, consideration, and tact; it includes perceptiveness regarding customer needs and the ability to communicate accurately and pleasantly” (Bowen and Schneider, 2014:7). Previous research has provided an understanding of these characteristics of individual service orientation. Less is known how individuals with different levels of service orientation act in specific situations, and especially in situations that generally are considered as difficult due to misbehaving customers. The purpose of the paper is to examine the relationship between employees’ service orientation and the handling strategies they use in situations of customer misbehavior.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data was collected from 2943 retail employees using an online survey. Four scenarios describing situations with difficult customers were presented followed by questions about how likely the respondent would use different handling strategies. 7 point Likert scales were used. The scenarios were (in brief):

- A customer who got upset when denied to return a good without the receipt
  - A customer who acted clumsily while trying to pay by credit card, causing delays for other customers
  - A customer interrupting the employee while serving another customer
  - A customer talking on her cell phone throughout the check-out procedure, ignoring questions from the employee.
- 6 items about service orientation derived from Schneider & Bowen 1995 and Donovan et al 2004 were used in a cluster analysis to divide the sample in two groups: High and low service orientation. It should be noted that the “low” group scored fairly high on most of the items used in the analysis.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Bowen, D. E., & Schneider, B. (2014). A service climate synthesis and future research agenda. *Journal of Service Research*, 17(1), 5–22.
- Donovan, D. T., Brown, T. J., & Mowen, J. C. (2004). Internal benefits of service-worker customer orientation: job satisfaction, commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors. *Journal of marketing*, 128-146.
- Felleson, M., and Salomonson, N. (2016). The expected retail customer: Value co-creator, co-producer or disturbance?, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 30, pp. 204-211.
- Schneider, B., & Bowen, D. E. (1995). *Winning the service game*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research has been financed by Grant no. 2012-641 from the Swedish Research Council and Grant no. 2012-0741 from Forte, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Markus Felleson  
Markus.Felleson@kau.se  
Phone: +46 (0)54-700 15 95

Nicklas Salomonson  
Nicklas.Salomonson@hb.se  
Phone: +46 (0)33 435 44 79

## RESULTS

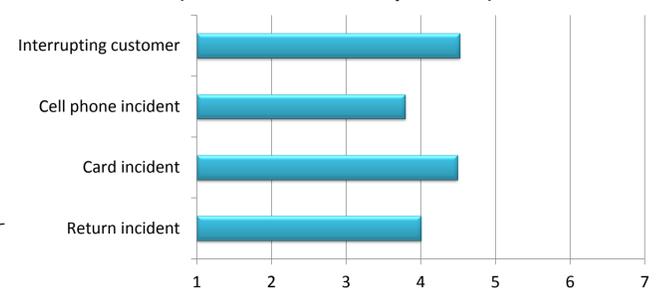
Although rather specific and intricately described, all four scenarios were recognized by the respondents as fairly common, albeit with some variation due to type of store. There were no significant differences between the higher and lower service oriented groups, with the exception of the fourth scenario which was considered slightly more common by the higher group.

Turning to the aim of our study, our results show significant differences between high and low service oriented employees in their likelihood to adopt 13 of the 18 handling strategies suggested in connection to the four scenarios.

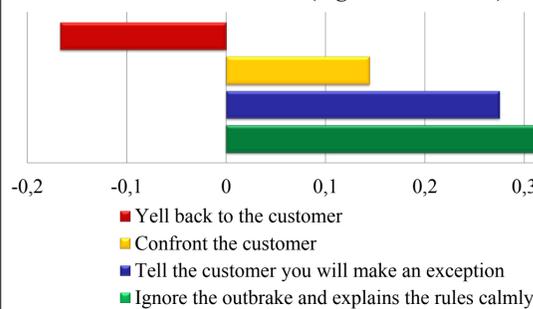
Service orientation thus seems to affect employee behavior also in negative situations, and generally increases the likelihood of solution oriented strategies. Also, a closer examination of the data reveals another tendency within the answers of the two groups: What separates the highly service oriented employees from the others is in particular their relative preference for strategies that positively deals with the interactive and social aspects of the described situations, and their avoidance of strategies that threatens these aspects.

The graphs below report handling strategies with significant differences between high and low service oriented employees. The most likely strategies to adopt for both groups were to ignore the outbreak and explain the rules (return scenario), ask for cash or another card (card scenario), ignore the customer (cell phone scenario) and refer the interrupting customer to a co-worker (interrupting customer scenario).

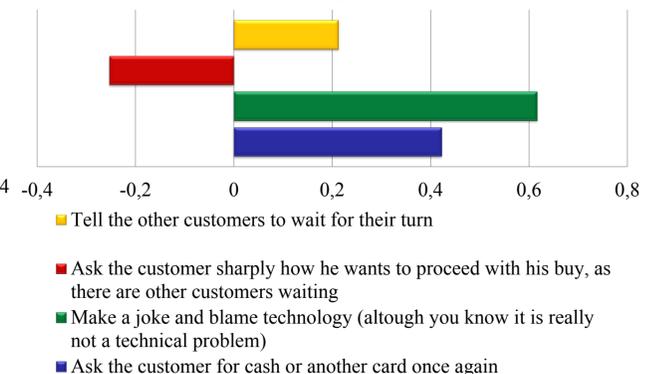
How common is the scenario (not common at all - very common)



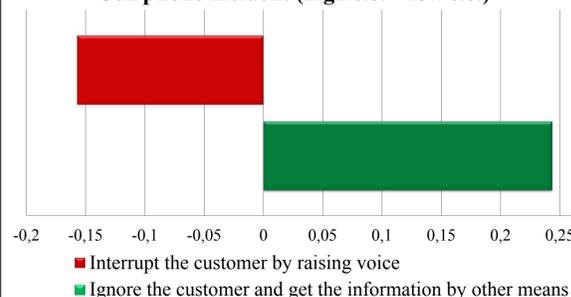
Return incident (high s.o. – low s.o.)



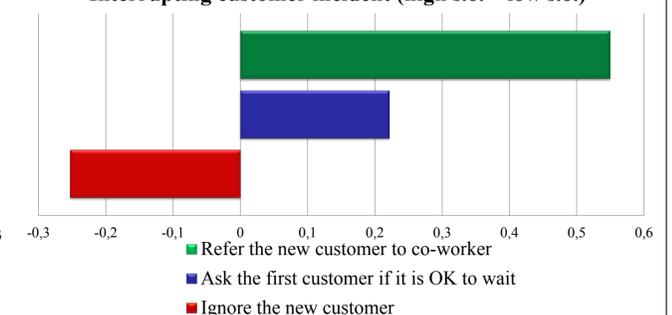
Card incident (high s.o. – low s.o.)



Cell phone incident (high s.o. – low s.o.)



Interrupting customer incident (high s.o. – low s.o.)



## CONCLUSIONS

- Front line staff service orientation does have an impact on the way “negative” service situations are handled.
- Over all, service orientation increases the likelihood of active, solution oriented handling strategies.
- Service orientation seems to carry with it a tendency to prioritize the quality of the service interaction, avoiding customer confrontation and conflicts and smoothen out social tensions.
- As modern retail is highly rationalised, such a focus on interactive qualities might come at odds with the underlying business model of the retail companies.
- This tension might also be described as conflicting demands placed on the employees, which, if internalized, have the potential of causing work related stress (see also Felleson & Salomonson 2016).



UNIVERSITY OF BORÅS



SERVICE RESEARCH CENTER  
CTF | CENTRUM FÖR TJÄNSTEFORSKNING