

Customer Responses to Service Providers' Assertiveness

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Abstract

The study investigates customer responses to service encounters characterized by a high degree of service providers' assertiveness, and the individual factors moderating the resulting responses. The first of two formal experiments examines the effects of service providers' assertive behavior on participants' satisfaction. The second examines the extent to which the level of product knowledge moderates the effect of such assertive behavior on customer reactions. The results suggest that, assertive behavior may be detrimental when it is unexpected. However, product knowledge constitutes an important boundary condition, in that the negative effect of over-assertive behavior on customer satisfaction is limited to customers with high product knowledge.

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Introduction

Control is among the key human motivations and has often been defined as the need to demonstrate one's competence, superiority, and mastery over the environment. Empirical evidence has shown that increased perceived control exerts a significant positive impact on human physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Burger, 1987; Sherrod, Hage, Halpern, & More, 1977). Extending the notion of perceived control to service settings, Hui and Bateson (1991) and Cranage and Sujan (2004) show that giving more choice to the consumer leads to enhanced emotional responses during the consumption experience. Perceived control also has been discussed in the service encounter literature as important to satisfaction with an encounter (Bitran & Hoeh, 1990).

However, it is well within the compass of most consumers' real-life experiences that, the service providers employed hard influence tactics to limit the right to act on one's own and thereby threatens expected freedom to exercise self-governance; for example, the sales assistants in a clothing store actively offers comments on a selection of possible choices, or even brings different garments to try instead. Pressure tactics, such as assertiveness, which is characterized by an attempt to force compliance (Yagil, 2001), are likely to be associated with perceived threat to freedom, and may affect the success of the service encounter and customers' evaluation of the service quality.

While much research has been done to identify behaviors and the personal interaction components that consumers use to evaluate service encounters, surprisingly little is known about the role of service providers' assertiveness in the service encounter. The literature would imply that a service provider should anticipate customer's needs and be helpful (Lloyd & Luk, 2011; Winsted, 2000). However, they do not offer any insight into what this means to consumers, that is, what consumers want service providers actually to do. If suggestive attempts are interpreted as entailing a threat of reduced control and a loss of freedom, which may in turn result in a negatively charged state of mind (Clee & Wicklund, 1980) and uncomfortable feelings about the service encounter (Söderlund, 2013). It is thus imperative to know how to handle the scale.

The present article seeks to bridge this gap in the relevant literature by investigating service encounters characterized by a high degree of service provider's assertiveness, hypothesizing a potential counterproductive effect on customer satisfaction. To contribute to the understanding of possible negative consequences of assertive behavior, this study identifies and subsequently tests the individual factor which may moderate the resulting responses. Service providers will be helped to better understand the role of influence process and consumer choice in service encounters. Customers want to be treated respectfully and to know that the service provider cares about their rights to act on one's own. To train people to provide high quality, it is first necessary to understand and manage the crucial intangibles in server-customer interaction.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Service Providers' Assertiveness and the Impact on Customer Satisfaction

Service providers' behaviors, more specifically their assertive behaviors, gain salience in relating to consumers' control perception. Prior research has suggested that a consumer's perceived control can have considerable impact on the service experience (Bitran & Hoeh, 1990). Yagil (2001) argued that influence tactics that employed by service providers affect the success of the service encounter and customers' evaluation of the service quality.

Unexpectedly high levels of assertiveness could be perceived as undue attempts to influence choice and thereby limit customers' freedom to exercise self-determination, in effect, to do as they please. Such assertive performance could be construed as pushy and aggressive, threatening individual freedom of choice, with potentially negative effects on overall customer satisfaction. A service provider's assertive behavior might also be interpreted by the customer as reflecting a lack of respect; it may convey a degradation of the customers' status and thus lead to a general sense of dissatisfaction with the service (Yagil, 2001). Accordingly, the first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H1. Customers are less satisfied with service providers' assertiveness.

The Moderating Effect of Product Knowledge

One variable that is associated with confidence in decision-making ability, subjective product knowledge (Park & Moon, 2003), is an indicator of an individual's orientation to react defensively to the attempts at influence. Brucks (1985) notes that a consumer's subjective knowledge is related to a consumer's self-confidence regarding decision making. Selnes and Gronhaug (1986) argue that subjective knowledge is preferred when the focus is given to the motivational aspect of product knowledge. Feelings of confidence represent the subjective counterpart of objective evidence of task competence. Personal self-confidence reflects consumers' perceived ability to protect themselves, including their apprehending persuasion tactics used by marketers (Bearden, Hardesty, & Rose, 2001), and leads to a decreased likelihood that the individual will confirm to influence attempts.

In pursuing personal independence, individuals with high subjective product knowledge are thus especially likely to resist external influence. Compared to their low-knowledge counterparts who felt they had to trust the judgment of others, such consumers are consequently less tolerant of service providers' assertiveness and less ready to accept the attempts to influence. Hence, extremely assertive behavior is likely to have an adverse effect on satisfaction in the case of consumers with higher product knowledge, and the following hypothesis is accordingly proposed:

H2. Product knowledge will moderate the impact of service providers' assertiveness on satisfaction. Specifically, service providers' assertiveness will have a more negative impact on the satisfaction scores of consumers with higher product knowledge as opposed to those with lower product knowledge.

Study 1

Research Design and Procedure

The objective of this study was to test the proposition that service providers' assertiveness exerts a negative effect on the satisfaction rating. A one-factor, three-level between-subjects experimental design manipulated the level of assertive behavior, in written descriptions of a hypothetical service encounter, as 'normal', 'moderately assertive' or 'extremely assertive'.

Participants in the study were 117 undergraduate students at a large university in Taiwan. The average age of the sample was just under 21 and the female-to-male ratio was 62.4%: 37.6%. In small-group sessions, they were randomly assigned to one of the three levels of assertive behavior and asked to read a brief written scenario, in which they were shopping around in a clothing store. Those allocated to the normal service condition read that a sales assistant would show greeting, explain the clothes which are new arrival, and invite them to try on at their pleasure. In the 'moderately assertive' condition, the sales assistant would show greeting, explain the clothes which are new arrival, and actively bring different garments to ask them to try, however those are not the styles they prefer. In the 'extremely assertive' condition, participants were told that the sales assistant would not only bring different garments they actually don't prefer to ask them to try, but offer comments on a selection of possible choices and pick accessories to fit. Once the written descriptions in the scenarios had been read, participants answered a series of structured questions.

The three levels of assertive behavior described were established by a pretest, in which 50 students responded on a seven-point Likert scale to three statements adapted from a study by Rains and Turner (2007) for each scenario: The service provider's behavior described 'threatened my freedom to choose' and 'tried to make a decision for me', and 'tried to pressure me'. The average scores were 3.07 for the normal level, 5.82 for moderately assertive and 6.47 for extremely assertive. The average ratings for the normal condition were found to be significantly lower than those for either moderately assertive ($t = 11.47, p < 0.0001$) or extremely assertive ($t = 13.56, p < 0.0001$). There was also a significant difference in mean scores between the moderately and extremely assertive scenarios ($t = 7.31, p < 0.0001$).

Measures

Customer satisfaction was assessed with five items adapted from Sierra, Heiser, and McQuitty (2009), scored on a seven-point Likert scale, with a higher score indicating stronger agreement: 'I am happy with the service I just received', 'The service that I received was pleasant', 'I am satisfied with the service I received', 'I am content with the service I received', and 'I had an enjoyable service experience'. The internal validity of this scale was high, at $\alpha = 0.96$.

Results and Discussion

To test the success of the manipulation of assertive levels, participants responded to the same statements on the same scale as in the pre-test. Both the moderately assertive behavior scenario ($M = 5.18$) and the extremely assertive alternative ($M = 5.72$)

generated a significantly higher opinion than the normal service condition ($M = 3.70$, $F(1, 76) = 22.13$, $p < 0.0001$ and $F(1, 77) = 56.59$, $p < 0.0001$ respectively). The inter-group difference between the moderate and extreme levels was also significant, at $F(1, 75) = 4.59$, $p < 0.05$.

ANOVA found that the service providers' assertiveness had a significant effect on customer satisfaction ($F(2, 114) = 16.53$, $p < 0.0001$). Contrast analysis found that participants who reacted to both the scenarios depicting moderately ($M = 3.58$) and extremely assertive behavior ($M = 3.07$) reported lower satisfaction than those responding to the normal-service scenario: $M = 4.37$, $F(1, 76) = 11.36$, $p < 0.01$, $F(1, 77) = 33.43$, $p < 0.0001$ respectively. There was also a significant difference between the satisfaction scores under the moderate and extreme assertiveness conditions: $F(1, 75) = 4.96$, $p < 0.05$. These results support H1.

The conclusion drawn from Study 1 is that customer satisfaction is decreased by the assertive behavior of the service provider. As assertive behavior comprises a situation in which customer contact person is trying to impose his or her will on the customer, it may convey a threat to self-determination and lead to a general sense of dissatisfaction with the service.

Study 2

Research Design and Procedure

The objective of Study 2 was to test the proposition that assertive behavior exerts a negative effect on the satisfaction rating of an individual with higher, but not lower product knowledge. The hypothesis was tested by means of a quasi-experimental design based on a 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design. The experimental variables are the level of assertiveness (normal versus extremely) and of product knowledge (low versus high). The former was manipulated and the latter measured. A new sample was drawn from the same sampling frame as in Study 1, comprising 146 participants with an average age of 21, of whom 69.2% were female.

The written scenarios instructed them to imagine being in a retail store, intending to buy a particular tablet PC. In the control condition of 'normal' service, the scenario explained that the sales assistant demonstrates how to use the tablet PC and recommends the alternatives for the customers' consideration. Those in the 'assertive' condition were to imagine that the sales assistant offers unfavorable comments on the item they intended to buy and forces them to consider the alternative he highly recommended. Once the written descriptions in the scenarios had been read, participants answered a series of structured questions measuring customer satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.94$), the assertiveness manipulation, and their subjective product knowledge ($\alpha = 0.89$). Participants were classified as high or low product knowledge on the basis of their position relative to the median split of all scores. Those who were around the median were eliminated from the dataset, leaving a total of 135 participants.

Measures

For product knowledge, the question invited agreement on a seven-point Likert scale with three statements adapted from Park and Moon (2003): 'Compared to other

students, I am very familiar with tablet PC', 'I know very precisely what attributes of a tablet PC decide the function of the computer', and 'I can make a satisfactory purchase of a tablet PC based on only my own knowledge, without another person's help'.

Results and Discussion

The manipulation of assertive behavior was successful: average scores for the same three statements on the same seven-point scale as before were 4.48 for the normal service condition and 5.25 for the assertiveness condition. The inter-group difference between the normal and assertive conditions was significant, at $F(1, 133) = 11.68, p < 0.001$.

ANOVA demonstrated that the main effect of the assertiveness was significant for satisfaction scores ($F(1, 131) = 15.82, p < 0.001$), but that product knowledge did not have a significant main effect on satisfaction ($F(1, 131) = 0.66$). The level of assertiveness and product knowledge interacted significantly in their effects on satisfaction ($F(1, 131) = 9.89, p < 0.01$).

Contrast analysis found no significant difference, in the normal-service condition, between the mean satisfaction scores of low-knowledge participants ($M = 4.28$) and those of their high-knowledge counterparts ($M = 4.70, F(1, 72) = 2.39$). By contrast, the satisfaction scores of participants exposed to the assertive behavior scenario were lower for those classified as high product knowledge ($M = 3.43$) than for those with low product knowledge ($M = 4.13, F(1, 59) = 10.38, p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the satisfaction scores of low-knowledge individuals were unaffected by the assertive level ($F(1, 62) = 0.37$). As expected, high-reactance participants who reacted to the scenario depicting assertive behavior reported lower satisfaction than those responding to the normal-service scenario ($F(1, 69) = 24.20, p < 0.0001$). These results support H2.

Study 2 found that product knowledge did influence participants' satisfaction scores for the two assertive levels tested. The negative impact of assertiveness is likely to be limited to individuals with greater product knowledge.

Conclusions

Despite the acknowledged importance of interpersonal interaction in the service encounter, there remain gaps for further investigation particularly on uncovering dimensions of service quality pertaining to behaviors during the interpersonal interaction and the resultant emotional responses from customers. This study focused on consumers' responses to service providers' assertive behavior, a line of research which offers practical guidance on influence attempts. The findings provide evidence that the keen attempts to influence may actually militate against customer satisfaction. The research findings also permit the identification of consumer factors moderating the resulting customer responses.

The empirical results presented here suggest that, assertive behavior may be detrimental when it is unexpected. However, product knowledge constitutes an important boundary condition, in that the negative effect of over-assertive behavior on

customer satisfaction is limited to customers with high product knowledge. Such individuals may react negatively to service providers' assertiveness as a way of boosting their sense of self-reliance.

The nature and findings of this study offer several recommendations for service management. Service providers can achieve to improve the service experience and satisfaction of customers by placing emphasis on the need for managing influence tactics. Staff may need to be more strategic in exerting suggestive attempts, so as to meet the needs of specific customers. Too great an increase may in fact be an obstacle to positive evaluations for customers with high product knowledge.

Limitations of this study warrant attention. The two experiments were paper-and-pencil studies with written descriptions. Consequently, the emotional content of the scenarios might have been minimal. Future studies should therefore replicate and extend our findings by using a field study or a more natural methodology, such as audio-visual presentations simulating service encounters. The latter have been found to evoke the same psychological and behavior responses as actual service settings (Bateson & Hui, 1992). Future work could also investigate how other consumer characteristics might moderate an individual's susceptibility to service provider's assertiveness, including the tendency to experience reactance, a personality variable that reflects the extent to which an individual is likely to resist external influence and the invasion of personal space.

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