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Is maximum customer service always a good thing? Customer satisfaction in response to over-attentive service

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Is maximum customer service always a good thing? Customer satisfaction in response to over-attentive service

Response to
over-attentive
service

437

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Abstract

Purpose – To investigate customer satisfaction with service encounters characterized by an over-attentive level of service, and the contextual and individual factors moderating the resulting satisfaction scores.

Design/methodology/approach – The first of three formal experiments tests the prediction that consumer reactions vary with the margin between actual and expected levels of service. The second examines the influence of the tendency to psychological reactance on participants' responses to excessive service. The third assesses the effect of a predisposition to suspiciousness on satisfaction scores, in scenarios which, respectively, specify that extremely over-attentive service or "normal" service are directed at participants personally or is offered to all customers unselectively.

Findings – The first experiment found moderately excessive service to be acceptable to most participants but unexpectedly over-attentive service to affect satisfaction negatively. The second found the negative impact of extremely over-attentive service to be limited to participants with a greater tendency to psychological reactance. The third found that a high predisposition to suspicion resulted in lower satisfaction levels whether the scenario specified extremely over-attentive service that was personal or on offer to all, whereas the satisfaction scores of participants with a lower predisposition to suspicion were not affected in those scenarios.

Originality/value – Whereas the relevant literature has focussed on customer reactions to service that falls below expectations, this paper studies service encounters in which it surpasses them. It hypothesizes a counterproductive effect on customer satisfaction and identifies contextual and individual factors that explain and predict that outcome.

Keywords Over-attentive service, Psychological reactance, Customer suspicion, Customer satisfaction, Customers, Customer service management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

It is well within the compass of most consumers' real-life experiences that, throughout the course of a meal in a restaurant, the waiter repeatedly returns to the table to ask if "everything is all right"; or the sales assistant in a clothing store offers comments on a selection of possible choices, or even brings different garments to try. These scenarios illustrate the everyday situations in which the level of attention is beyond the customer's normal expectations. Whether that unsolicited "service" is welcome or is regarded as excessive will depend on the individual and the circumstances. The issue is the number and frequency of service-related interventions by the waiter or sales assistant.



The application of confirmation/disconfirmation analysis to the measurement of service quality has been widely documented in the literature, and is generally accepted. The basic premise of the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm is that consumers assess a transactional exchange on the basis of the extent to which performance has matched expectations. "Positive disconfirmation" occurs when service is better than expected, and "negative disconfirmation" is the response when it performs below expectations (Oliver, 1977, 1980). Research has shown that multiple expectations are involved in gauging the quality of a service encounter, which may relate to what consumers would ideally want, what they predict will happen, or what they consider to be adequate service (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). Despite the fact that there is no consensus in the service quality literature on the specific nature of expected standards, research suggests that exceeding customer expectations will have strongly positive effects on perceptions of service quality (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985).

Although a level of service that exceeds expectations may result in delighted customers and influence subsequent behavior positively, a feeling on their part that the performance has been overdone is more likely to influence them negatively, as the "hard sell" might be in a sales setting. Service deemed to be "over-attentive" is that which goes well beyond most service protocols and may even be considered by typical customers to be a denial of their freedom of action and choice. Unusual and atypical behavior by service providers may trigger cognitive or affective responses that call the quality of the exchange into question.

Much of the current literature on disconfirmation has focussed on customer reactions to service that falls short of expectations. Service encounters in which those are exceeded have not been as thoroughly examined. Only a few researchers have studied "overgenerous" service delivery (e.g. Estelami and De Maeyer, 2002; Imrie, 2005). The present paper seeks to bridge this gap in the relevant literature by investigating service encounters characterized by an excessive level of service, hypothesizing a potential counterproductive effect on customer satisfaction. To contribute to the understanding of possible negative consequences of over-attentive service, this study draws on the concepts of reactance exhibited by consumers to identify and subsequently test the contextual and individual factors which may moderate the resulting satisfaction scores. From a managerial perspective, this paper warns against a strategy of differentiation based on overdoing the level of the service offered to customers. Even if extra service is objectively helpful, it will not necessarily be welcome and appreciated.

The next section derives hypotheses for experimental testing from a review of the literature. After describing the experiments and reporting the results, the paper concludes with a discussion of the practical implications for service providers and suggestions for future research.

Service beyond expectations and the impact on customer satisfaction

The majority of the many previous studies of customer satisfaction have focussed primarily on the relationship between pre-purchase expectations of performance and the resulting post-purchase satisfaction. Much of the interest in this relationship can be traced to the expectation-disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1977, 1980), in which expectations provide a frame of reference for evaluative judgments. Satisfaction is seen as a function of pre-existing expectations and any perceived disconfirmation. If performance is judged to have exceeded expectations, the consumer is satisfied; if it falls short, the outcome is dissatisfaction. Numerous studies support the hypothesized

impact of the disconfirmation of expectations on satisfaction (Erevelles and Leavitt, 1992; Tse *et al.*, 1990; Yi, 1990). Treating these expectations as zones or thresholds rather than as discrete points, the zone-of-tolerance theory of Parasuraman *et al.* (1991) also suggests that inadequate service performance is likely to result in customer dissatisfaction, and that service performance above the desired level will result in satisfaction and even customer pleasure (Boulding *et al.*, 1993; Oliver *et al.*, 1997).

While it is commonly believed that high levels of satisfaction are achieved when perceived performance exceeds consumer expectations (Hamer, 2006), there is emerging evidence that increasing the positive gap between expectation and performance may not bring about any major changes in the levels of satisfaction (Saklani *et al.*, 2000). Studying service encounters characterized by “generosity” on the part of the service provider, Estelami and De Maeyer (2002) demonstrated that although such outperforming of consumer expectations might contribute to value, over-generosity could in fact, contrary to conventional belief, lower customer evaluation of a service.

If a necessary precondition of satisfaction is that there should be either no discrepancy between expectations and performance, or at least a positive one, the scope for service providers to take extra initiatives, be enthusiastic about service delivery, and make service encounters positive could be expected to ensure high levels of customer satisfaction. However, given that customers enter a service encounter with certain expectations of the service in question, unexpectedly high levels of service may be perceived as unnecessary and even disturbing. Such over-attentive performance could therefore be construed as pushy and aggressive, threatening individual freedom of choice and self-determination, with potentially negative effects on overall customer satisfaction. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

- H1.* Customers are more satisfied with moderately over-attentive service and less satisfied with extremely over-attentive service.

Psychological reactance

Unexpectedly high levels of service 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. Cherulnik and Citrin (1974) argued that the conditions attending the act of threatening self-reliance are the crucial determinants of reactance. However, it seems probable that those conditions are not perceived in exactly the same way by all individuals who are exposed to them. If over-attentive service in fact induces reactance, then the consequent decrease in satisfaction should be greater for individuals with a higher tendency to experience reactance.

Psychological reactance has been defined by Brehm (1966) as a countervailing force aroused by attempts to constrain free behavior, specifically in the form of “offers.” If customers believe that their freedom of choice is threatened by an attempt to exert influence on the part of a waiter or sales assistant, as explained in the “Introduction,” they will be motivated to restore that freedom by acting in a way opposite to what is advocated (Clee and Wicklund, 1980; Lee *et al.*, 2010). Despite Brehm’s original assumption that psychological reactance is a situation-specific construct, there is an increasing body of research evidence for its being a generally stable disposition (Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Cherulnik and Citrin, 1974; Pavey and Sparks, 2009; Wendlandt and Schrader, 2007).

Reactance theory asserts that individuals might differ in the extent to which they are prone to experience reactance, and the extent to which they view a person’s intent to

influence as threatening (Brehm and Brehm, 1981). Reactant individuals have been found to be less interested than average in making a good impression, less tolerant, more dominant, and more self-confident (Buboltz *et al.*, 2003; Dowd *et al.*, 1994; Hellman and McMillin, 1997). The level of reactance has been measured in terms of the tendency to be angry or frustrated when freedom of choice is restricted, resistance to the influence and advice of others, and general non-compliance (Donnell *et al.*, 2001; Hong, 1992; Hong and Faedda, 1996).

In pursuing personal independence and freedom, highly reactant individuals are thus especially likely to resist external influence, the invasion of personal space, and “favors” that obligate them (Hong and Faedda, 1996), all three of which apply to the retail situations portrayed earlier. Compared to their low-reactance counterparts, such consumers are consequently less tolerant of over-attentive sales assistants (or waiters) and less ready to accept the unexpected level of service. Hence, extremely over-attentive service is likely to have an adverse effect on satisfaction in the case of consumers with a higher tendency to experience reactance, and the following hypothesis is accordingly proposed:

- H2.* Psychological reactance will moderate the impact of extremely over-attentive service on satisfaction. Specifically, extremely over-attentive service will have a more negative impact on the satisfaction scores of consumers whose tendency to psychological reactance is higher as opposed to those in whom the tendency is lower.

Effects of service exclusivity and customer suspicion

One variable that is associated with doubt, suspicion, is also an indicator of an individual's orientation towards opposition and seems to influence reactance (Roux, 2007). Suspicion is defined in this context as a dispositional characteristic influencing attitudes towards persuasive attempts in general (Echebarria-Echabe, 2010). It refers to the belief that a person's behavior may reflect a motive that he or she wishes to hide from the target of his or her behavior (Fein *et al.*, 1990). Highly suspicious individuals will entertain multiple hypotheses about the motivation or genuineness of another's behavior, which may in fact be equally plausible explanations for it. Suspicion of ulterior motives tends to make individuals less disposed to accept the attempts at influence.

Fein *et al.* (1990) further argued, however, that contextual information about behavior which suggests (implicitly) that it may have been influenced by ulterior motives may be a necessary precondition for the manifestation of suspicion. Individuals may be the targets of others' suspicions because of the context in which their behavior occurs (Fein and Hilton, 1994). The influence of suspicion on customer reactance to unexpectedly over-attentive service is thus likely to vary according to the context, which will in the case of the study reported in this paper be the “exclusivity” of the service offered: either personal, directed at an individual diner, or impersonal, reflecting a general organizational service norm to be offered to any customer.

When the unexpectedly over-attentive service is delivered impersonally, an individual recipient may regard it as standard, in a way that cannot easily be discounted as reflective of ulterior motives. The explanation for the service provider's behavior may be enough to overwhelm the differences in levels of suspicion among the individual recipients of the service. A high level of such routine provision standardized service to all customers may, however, pose a threat to one's sense of self-determination

and reduce the pleasure derived from the experience. The outcome is likely to be that satisfaction with the impersonal service will be decreased, on the grounds that it is inflexible, tedious, and superfluous.

In the case of service offered exclusively to an individual, evaluations of over-attentive service are likely to be closely associated with the notion of suspicion. Those who react positively to a particular personal-service encounter may not view it as an overt attempt to influence their choice, although others may find the unexpected level of personal attention “too good to be true,” and evaluate it negatively.

Personal service is more salient for the consumer than impersonal service, and its exclusivity triggers highly suspicious participants to devote cognitive resources to the questions of why service providers behaved as they did. Fein *et al.* (1990) associated such suspicion with an unwillingness to infer what others feel or think on the basis of their explicit behavior and an increased inclination to consider the probable motives for particular behavior. Fein and Hilton (1994) found that a high level of suspicion of ulterior motives resulted in negative feelings about an individual provider’s sincerity, even if there was clear evidence that the behavior in question could not be explained adequately by such motivation.

Such suspicions result in judgment being suspended with respect to the true motives or the sincerity of the unexpected personal service. Although the conclusion was not necessarily that the deliverer of the service was actually untrustworthy, the potential intention to exert direct influence could be sufficient to provoke reactance (Fitzsimons and Lehmann, 2004) as well as generally negative feelings about the service provider (Fein and Hilton, 1994). Less suspicion-prone consumers are unlikely to be affected by potential ulterior motives underlying the provision of an over-attentive level of personal service, regarding it more positively as an expression of courtesy or respect. This prediction can be expressed as a pair of hypotheses, in which “normal service” describes the level of attention a customer would expect, all other things being equal, at the type of service encounter in question:

- H3a.* Extremely over-attentive service that is impersonal will result in lower satisfaction than normal service regardless of the level of a consumer’s propensity to suspicion.
- H3b.* Extremely over-attentive that is personal will result in lower satisfaction than normal service if the consumer has a higher propensity to suspicion but will result in higher satisfaction if the customer’s propensity to suspicion is lower.

Study 1a

Method

The objective of this study was to test the hypothesis that customer reactions to a level of service that is beyond their expectations vary with the margin by which those are exceeded. A one-factor, three-level between-subjects experimental design manipulated the level of service delivered, in written descriptions of a hypothetical service encounter, as “normal,” “moderately over-attentive,” or “extremely over-attentive.”

Participants were drawn from a sampling frame of undergraduate management students at a large university in Taiwan. The average age of the 105 participants recruited was 20 years, and the gender balance was 61 percent female to 39 percent male. In small-group sessions, they were randomly assigned to one of the three levels of

service and asked to read a brief written scenario, in which they were at an average-price full-service restaurant serving traditional western-style dishes in the sequence expected by local diners: appetizer, salad, soup, entrée, and dessert. This scenario-based approach is consistent with other studies on customer reactions to service encounters in which expectations are exceeded (e.g. Estelami and De Maeyer, 2002) and has several advantages. First, a scenario-based experimental approach enables costly and difficult manipulations to be operationalized more easily. The approach facilitates a tighter control of the independent variable and removes unmanageable variables that can be found in the real world. That is, the scenario method enhances the internal and statistical validity of the conclusions by controlling extraneous and manipulated variables, and by reducing random noise in the dependent variables with a uniform setting for all participants (Churchill, 1995). Second, such an approach alleviates difficulties associated with the observation or enactment of services in the field, such as ethical considerations (Smith and Bolton, 1998), and with the practical undesirability of intentionally imposing controlled service encounters on customers (Smith *et al.*, 1999). Third, scenarios (as opposed to retrospective self-reports) reduce the bias that can result from memory lapses, rationalization tendencies, and consistency factors (Smith and Bolton, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999).

In the control condition of “normal” service, the scenario explained that a waiter would name each course when it was served and solicit participants’ opinions about the dishes and the service only after all courses had been served. In the “moderately over-attentive” condition, the waiter would give a brief description of each course, but solicit opinions only after the soup and dessert courses. In the “extremely over-attentive” condition, participants were told that the waiter would elaborate on every course and solicit an opinion after each. Once the written descriptions in the scenarios had been read, participants answered a series of structured questions.

The three levels of service described were established by a pretest, in which 35 students responded on a seven-point Likert scale to two statements for each scenario: “The service described outperforms my expectations” and “I consider the service described to be beyond normal expectations.” The average scores were 4.72 for the normal level, 5.28 for moderately over-attentive service, and 5.87 for extremely over-attentive. The average ratings for the normal condition were found to be significantly lower than those for either moderately over-attentive ($t = 2.79, p < 0.01$) or extremely over-attentive ($t = 4.61, p < 0.0001$). There was also a significant difference in mean scores between the moderately and extremely over-attentive scenarios ($t = 4.56, p < 0.001$).

Customer satisfaction was measured by five items adapted from Sierra *et al.* (2009), scored on a seven-point Likert scale: “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 again high, at $\alpha = 0.94$.

Results and discussion

To test the success of the manipulation of service levels, participants responded to the same statements on the same scale as in the pre-test. Both the moderately over-attentive service scenario ($M = 4.97$) and the extremely over-attentive alternative ($M = 5.50$) generated a significantly higher opinion than the normal service condition ($M = 4.27, F(1, 68) = 6.16, p < 0.05$ and $F(1, 68) = 23.58, p < 0.0001$, respectively). The inter-group difference between the moderate and extreme levels was also significant, at $F(1, 68) = 4.08, p < 0.05$.

ANOVA revealed that the margin by which service exceeded expectations had a small, but significant main effect on customer satisfaction ($F(2, 102) = 2.86, p < 0.1, \eta^2 = 0.05$), as shown in Figure 1. The contrast analysis showed that there was no significant difference in the satisfaction scores of participants who had read scenarios depicting moderately over-attentive service, as opposed to those whose scenarios did not: $M = 5.34$ vs $M = 5.23, F(1, 68) = 0.19$. As predicted, extremely over-attentive service generated significantly lower customer satisfaction scores ($M = 4.80$) than normal service ($F(1, 68) = 3.21, p < 0.1$). *H1* is thus partially supported.

The conclusion drawn from Study 1a is that, although moderately over-attentive service will be acceptable to most of the individuals in the sample, unexpectedly high levels may indeed reduce satisfaction. A level of service beyond a certain limit may constrain increases in positive disconfirmation, instead actually eroding satisfaction scores.

Study 1b

Method

The objective of Study 1b was to test the proposition that extremely over-attentive service exerts a negative effect on the satisfaction rating of an individual with a higher, but not a lower propensity to psychological reactance. The hypothesis was tested by means of a quasi-experimental design based on a 2×2 between-subjects factorial design. The experimental variables are the levels of service delivered (normal vs extremely over-attentive) and of psychological reactance (low vs high). The former was manipulated and the latter measured. A very important limitation of quasi-experiments is that they lack a random assignment of participants to groups (Christensen *et al.*, 2011). The comparisons thereby depend on nonequivalent groups that may differ in ways other than the treatment of interest. To address this issue, participants across the quasi-experiment treatments were compared, so as to demonstrate as much equivalency as possible (Dimofte *et al.*, 2004).

A new sample was drawn from the same sampling frame as in Study 1a, comprising 202 participants with an average age of 20, of whom 70.8 percent were female. Participants read the same scenarios depicting normal or extremely over-attentive service as in Study 1a before responding to questionnaire items measuring customer satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.96$), the service level manipulation, and their tendency to

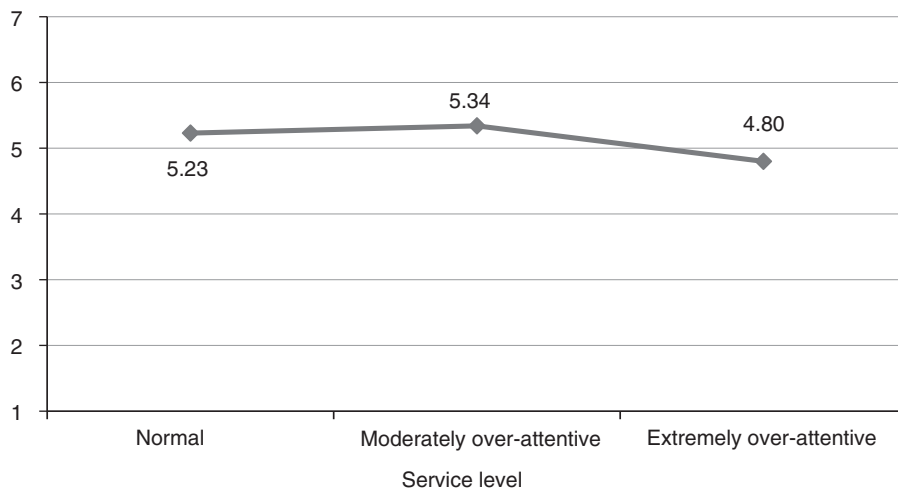


Figure 1.
Influence of service level
on customer satisfaction

psychological reactance. The last of those was a native-language adaptation of the refined Hong scale (Hong and Faedda, 1996). Participants were classified as high or low reactance on the basis of their position relative to the median split of all scores on the Hong scale. Those who were around the median were eliminated from the dataset, leaving a total of 192 participants. Participants' age and gender were measured to assess equivalence across the treatment conditions despite the lack of random assignment. No significant differences were observed between the high-reactance and low-reactance individuals in terms of either age ($p > 0.15$) or gender ($p > 0.59$).

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks for the level of service, replicating those in Study 1a, found that it was perceived as surpassing expectations more significantly by participants exposed to the extremely over-attentive scenario ($M = 5.50$) than by those allocated to the normal service scenario ($M = 4.65$, $F(1, 190) = 27.16$, $p < 0.0001$).

ANOVA[1] demonstrated that the main effect of the service level was not significant for participants' satisfaction scores ($F(1, 188) = 1.79$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$), but that a personal predisposition to psychological reactance had a significant main effect on satisfaction ($F(1, 188) = 4.56$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). Figure 2 shows that the level of service and psychological reactance interacted significantly in their effects on satisfaction ($F(1, 188) = 8.35$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$).

Contrast analysis[2] found no significant difference, in the normal-service condition, between the mean satisfaction scores of low-reactance participants ($M = 5.23$) and those of their high-reactance counterparts ($M = 5.34$, $F(1, 95) = 0.32$). As predicted, the satisfaction scores of low-reactance individuals were unaffected by the service level ($F(1, 98) = 1.16$). By contrast, high-reactance participants who reacted to the scenario depicting extremely over-attentive service reported lower satisfaction than those responding to the normal-service scenario ($F(1, 90) = 9.40$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the satisfaction scores of participants exposed to the extremely over-attentive service scenario were lower for those classified as high reactance ($M = 4.71$) than for those whose tendency to reactance was low ($M = 5.46$, $F(1, 93) = 11.30$, $p < 0.01$). These results support *H2*.

Study 1b found that the predisposition to reactance did influence participants' satisfaction scores for the two service levels tested. The negative impact of extremely

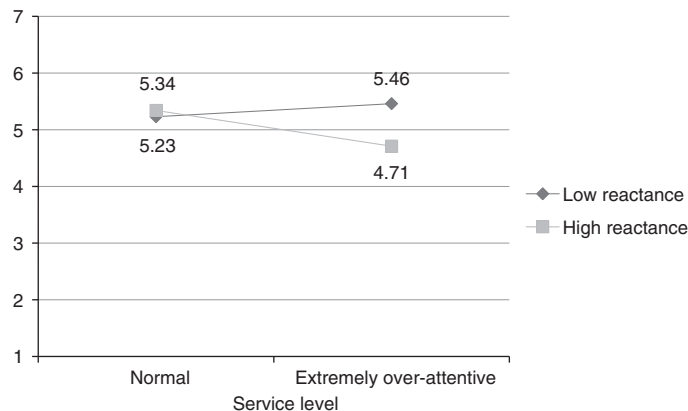


Figure 2.
Interaction effect on
customer satisfaction –
service level \times psychology
reactance

over-attentive service is likely to be limited to individuals with a greater tendency to psychological reactance. Their low-reactance counterparts would be less likely to resist attempts to influence them and therefore more likely to accept the unexpectedly over-attentive service.

Study 2

Method

The objective of Study 2 was to test *H3a* and *H3b*, relating to the effects of propensity to suspicion in the presence of over-attentive service that is either personal or impersonal. The sampling frame was again the same as for Studies 1a and 1b; the 391 participants had an average age of 20 and were 65 percent female. The hypotheses were tested by means of a quasi-experimental design based on a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects factorial design: level of service delivered (normal or extremely over-attentive); mode of service delivery (impersonal or personal); propensity to suspicion (low or high). The level of service delivered and the mode of service delivery were manipulated experimentally, and suspicion was measured on a five-item seven-point scale developed by Echebarria-Echabe (2010).

The experimental scenario for this study again required participants to imagine themselves eating a meal of western-style dishes, in a sequence of courses familiar to them, in an average-priced full-service restaurant. Those allocated to the normal service condition read that a waiter would name each course as it was served and ask for their opinions about the dishes and the service after all courses had finally been consumed. In the scenario depicting extremely over-attentive service, the waiter would likewise introduce every course in turn, but would also solicit participants' opinions after each one. Additionally, they were instructed to imagine that this level of service was either directed at them personally and exclusively, or was experienced equally by other customers.

After this briefing, participants answered questions measuring customer satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.96$), testing the manipulation of the conditions and measuring their propensity to suspicion. The question relating to the third of those measures invited agreement on a seven-point Likert scale with five statements: "For me, it is very important to have my own opinions and points of views and to resist persuasive messages put forward to convince me"; "We live in a world in which one must be permanently on guard because there are many groups trying to influence our thoughts"; "Generally I am suspicious of any message designed to be persuasive"; "I am completely open to any new idea"; and "I have confidence in information that provides new points of view." Participants were classified as high suspicion or low suspicion on the basis of a score above or below the median value on the scale. Those who were around the median were eliminated from the dataset, leaving a total of 312 participants. No significant differences were observed between those rated high suspicion and low suspicion in terms of either age ($p > 0.40$) or gender ($p > 0.62$).

Results and discussion

The manipulation of service level was successful: average scores for the same two statements on the same seven-point scale as before were 4.88 for the normal service condition and 5.55 for the extremely over-attentive service condition. As expected, participants perceived extremely over-attentive service to exceed expectations by a larger margin than in the normal-service condition ($F(1, 310) = 25.18, p < 0.0001$).

ANOVA[3] revealed a significant main effect of service level on participants' satisfaction scores ($F(1, 304) = 15.70, p < 0.0001, \eta^2 = 0.04$). The service mode had a

marginally significant effect ($F(1, 304) = 2.82, p < 0.1, \eta^2 = 0.01$). The main effect of customer suspicion on satisfaction was also significant ($F(1, 304) = 11.17, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.03$). Figure 3 shows that the interaction between the level of suspicion and the level of service influenced customer satisfaction significantly ($F(1, 304) = 13.00, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.04$). The interactions between service level and service mode ($F(1, 304) = 0.75$) and service mode and the level of suspicion ($F(1, 304) = 0.83$) were not significant. Nor was there any significant three-way interaction effect ($F(1, 304) = 0.41$).

The satisfaction scores of participants with a higher propensity to suspicion, whose scenario described extremely over-attentive impersonal service ($M = 4.84$), were lower than those for participants in the normal and impersonal scenario ($M = 5.55, F(1, 88) = 10.26, p < 0.01$). Among participants with a lower propensity to suspicion, satisfaction scores for extremely over-attentive impersonal service ($M = 5.47$) did not differ from those when the level of service was normal ($M = 5.48, F(1, 62) = 0.01$)[4].

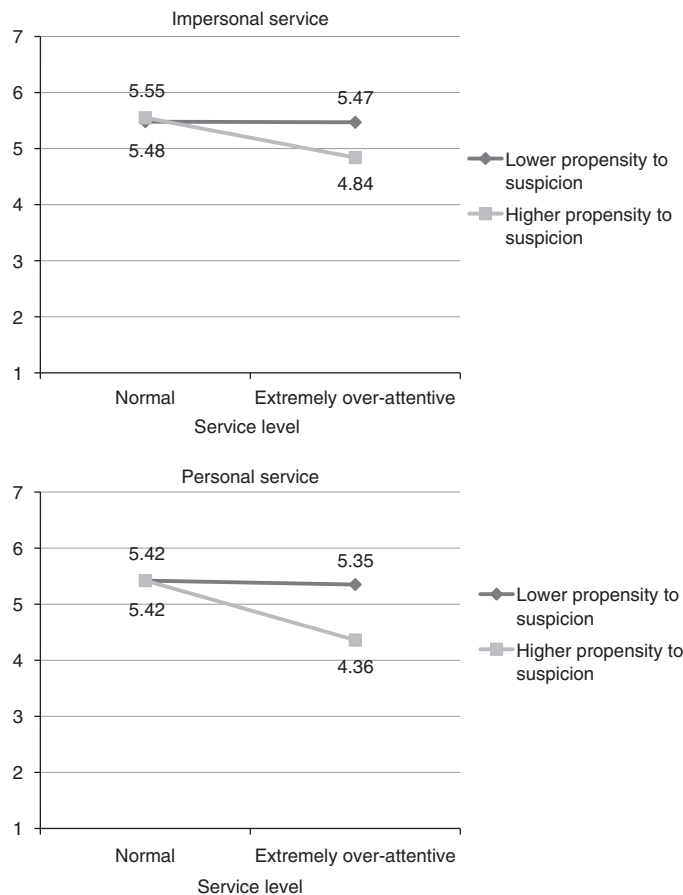


Figure 3.
Interaction effect on
customer satisfaction –
service level × customer
suspicion

These results partially support *H3a*, in that when the impersonal service was extremely over-attentive, the mean customer satisfaction score of those with a higher propensity to suspicion decreased but the same is not true of those with a lower propensity.

As predicted, when services are directed exclusively at participants with a higher predisposition to suspicion, the extremely over-attentive scenario ($M = 4.36$) resulted in lower satisfaction than the normal scenario ($M = 5.42$, $F(1, 84) = 20.23$, $p < 0.0001$). This result is consistent with *H3b*. Among participants with a lower predisposition to suspicion who had been allocated to the extremely over-attentive personal service scenario, the mean score ($M = 5.35$) was lower but not significantly so than among those responding to the normal-personal scenario ($M = 5.42$, $F(1, 70) = 0.08$). This result is inconsistent with *H3b*.

The results of Study 2 thus show that highly suspicious participants were less satisfied with extremely over-attentive service, compared to the normal-service condition, regardless of whether it was offered to everyone or presented as being personal and exclusive. Among those less inclined to be suspicious, the scenarios depicting both kinds of extremely over-attentive service had no effect on satisfaction scores. The results suggest that individuals with a higher predisposition to suspicion are more sensitive to unexpectedly high levels of service. Moreover, the effect of that predisposition on sensitivity to unexpectedly high levels of service is strong enough to go beyond the effect of service exclusivity.

General discussion

This study makes a significant contribution to the literature of services marketing and management. It has focussed on consumers' responses to exceeded expectations, a line of research which is not only conceptually interesting, as it explores a neglected aspect of the customer satisfaction spectrum, but also offers practical guidance on strategies for achieving high levels of customer satisfaction. The findings provide evidence on whether it is wise to extend the level of service as far as possible in all circumstances. Implicit strategic recommendations to do so may be misleading. The examination of reactance effects in the study provides good evidence that "more" is not necessarily "better." The research findings also permit the identification of contextual and personality-trait determinants of reactance to over-attentive service.

The empirical results presented here suggest that, although moderate levels of service beyond expectations are acceptable to most customers, higher levels are not equally appreciated. Some customers may not be "ready" for such intense service. The results thus call into question the popular belief that it is necessary to exceed consumer expectations by a greater margin in order to raise satisfaction (Cronin, 2003). Exceeding expectations, or indeed norms, may not always influence customers positively and can under certain conditions have a negative effect on their evaluation of the service. This finding supplements those of Saklani *et al.* (2000), that there is a "satiation" point beyond which additional service intensity does not raise satisfaction any further. The study reported here found that there does indeed seem to be an upper threshold which determines when service supplements are likely to be interpreted as extraordinary by the customer. Once that is crossed, the customer stops responding to further increases in "positive disconfirmation" and, even more damagingly, may begin to have uncomfortable feelings about the service encounter.

The study further finds that the tendency to psychological reactance constitutes an important boundary condition, in that the negative effect of overextended service is

limited to consumers with a strong predisposition to reactance. Such individuals react negatively to unexpectedly high levels of service as a way of boosting their sense of self-reliance. Their low-reactance counterparts seem to have an adaptive reaction to such attempts at influence. Psychological reactance thus offers a promising explanation of the counterproductive effect of excessive service on customer satisfaction, in the sense that it represents a perceived threat to the customer's sense of self-determination. That, in turn, generates negative attitudes and behavior.

Whether extremely over-attentive service is accepted or rejected also depends on the recipient's predisposition to be suspicious of it. Participants whose predisposition to suspicion was high were found to be less satisfied with such service, whether it was presented as having been directed at them personally and at other diners as well. The satisfaction of customers with a low predisposition was unaffected in those scenarios. This finding suggests that suspicion is the crucial determinant of customer reactance to service delivery that is unexpectedly over-attentive, not the extent to which it is perceived to be exclusive. A possible explanation is that naturally suspicious consumers react more defensively to what they see as attempted manipulation, while others may be more open to it (Echebarria-Echabe, 2010). Given the extraordinary nature of over-attentive service, highly suspicious recipients who detect hidden manipulation in any such behavior on the part of the provider are less disposed to accept it, regardless of its exclusivity. The reactance disappears in the case of low suspicious receptors since they are less likely to be affected by potential ulterior motives to provide an over-attentive level of service.

Managerial implications

The findings of the three studies are particularly relevant to service management in four respects. First, they challenge the common belief that increased service is bound to enhance the customer experience in service encounters, offering evidence that too great an increase may in fact be an obstacle to positive evaluations. It is well known that consumer expectations keep pace with ever improving quality, and are subject to constant revision. Thus, while it is normally imperative to improve service delivery over time, suddenly overshooting customer expectations by a wide margin may not yield the desired return.

Second, given the significant role played by expectations in the formation of customer satisfaction, service providers' strategy should be to encourage consumers to expect the highest level that can be delivered. Their marketing campaigns should aim to communicate that level of service to customers and potential customers. As Hamer (2006) puts it, rather than under-promising and over-delivering, service practitioners should seek to "realistically promise and consistently deliver."

Third, in the light of the finding that psychological reactance was related to the likelihood that an excessive level of service would precipitate counterproductive responses and a costly reduction of satisfaction, service-delivery strategy should take account of potential reactance in the target market. However, over-attentive service could be justified by seeking the recipient's permission first: for example, in the scenarios in this study, by asking "Would you like me to tell you about each course as it's served?" When such permission is freely and consciously given, the customer feels a sense of self-determination, which dispels the threat by validating the cause and thereby permitting acceptance of the over-attentive service.

Fourth, given that participants with a high predisposition to suspicion reacted negatively to the over-attentive service, it will therefore be desirable that

service-delivery strategy should be directed at coping with that predisposition among potential customers. Service providers should adapt their strategic behavior in such a way as to customize services to an individual customer, as far as that is possible. Front-line deliverers of the service (such as the waiter in the scenarios in this study) can adjust their verbal and nonverbal communication to the interpersonal context in which they are operating, or exercise discretion, so as to meet the needs of specific customers. The appropriateness of their chosen actions can be assured by means of explicit requests for feedback from customers and active monitoring of their reactions. A variety of negative responses to over-attentive service can be anticipated. For example, a customer might simply reject the service and display impatience, or might perhaps behave in a defensive manner. Displaying undue attention may simply not be worth the effort and expense, if its sincerity is questionable.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Certain limitations of the three-part study reported here present opportunities for future research. In place of the empirical focus on a specific example of over-attentive service in a single hypothetical context, a greater variety of service-delivery behaviors could be conceptualized and examined. In practice, consumer expectations might be exceeded in various ways: by courtesy, generosity, and so on. Exploring the relative effects of such dimension of service would be academically and pragmatically useful.

The level of realism of the scenarios employed in this study is sufficient for several reasons. First, the scenario method is most successful when there is high congruency between respondents' real-life experiences and the experimental scenarios they are requested to imagine (Dabholkar, 1996). Second, our scenarios referred to "you" and "your," to engage participants' attention and increase processing of the information received from the waiter (Burnkrant and Unnava, 1995). Third, testing of the manipulation of service levels was based on respondents' real-world experience of average-price western-style restaurants. However, questionnaire respondents may not be able to project themselves fully into imaginary situations and therefore may not respond as they would in a real-life service encounter. 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 and Hui, 1992).

The study was constrained by the use of self-report measures of the trait variables. It is possible that high-reactance individuals would be averse to reporting such a self-denigrating characteristic. A stronger test of *H2* would thus be to manipulate, rather than measure, the psychological reactance aroused by a perceived threat to the sense of autonomy or self-determination. Similarly, given that "suspicion" might be a product of the service provider's behavior rather than an inherent individual characteristic, it too could usefully be manipulated, rather than simply measured.

Notes

1. Following the lead of both Irwin and McClelland (2001) and Fitzsimons (2008), we further treat the psychological reactance as continuous and regress the dependent variable (customer satisfaction) on the continuous independent variable (psychological reactance), the manipulated independent variable (the level of service delivered), and their two-way interaction (psychological reactance \times the level of service delivered). The outcome was nearly identical to the ANOVA results, using the dichotomized psychological reactance variable.
2. Spotlight analysis yields the same results as those reported here (study 1b).

3. We also ran an analysis treating customer suspicion as continuous. The outcome was nearly identical to the ANOVA results, using the dichotomized customer suspicion variable.
4. Spotlight analysis yields almost the same results as those reported here (study 2).

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