

# The service encounter

## Introduction

Whether at arm's length or face to face, interaction between customer and organization lies at the heart of service delivery. The interaction may take many forms, from a brief encounter with a directions sign to a protracted encounter with a service employee. Whatever the nature and type of contact, each represents a moment of truth for the customer. This chapter will focus on customers engaging with organizations through the medium of service personnel. How we should portray that encounter and how it should be understood will underline the discussion. Both customer and employee perspectives will be addressed together with how service organizations seek to manage the process. Several concepts/techniques are introduced that are of fundamental importance for understanding the service encounter.

## 6.1 The essence of an encounter

The concept of an encounter means coming into contact with someone or something. Such contact may occur by chance or unexpectedly, e.g. running into an old friend. That will invariably be an amicable encounter. Equally more routine encounters, say with a car mechanic or a hotel receptionist, may be particularly pleasant. On the other hand, encounters in general with a work colleague, an organization or simply a 'friend' may be much less enjoyable. Additionally, an encounter can be had with an inanimate object in the form of a sign, vending machine, website, car wash. That also can be pleasing or frustrating. Clearly providers of services seek to make any encounter with a customer pleasurable. To achieve this, service organizations will resort to using a variety of tools/techniques. Although there is a growing tendency for encounters to be with 'things' most services still retain, in part or in total, face-to-face contact with the customer. For this reason, the tools and techniques cited earlier become ever-more important, and for some, the subject of controversy. Just how well

or how badly customers feel they were treated comes to particular prominence in the face-to-face encounter. In particular it is a type of contact where behaviour, attitudes, emotions and body language are visible from both sides (service provider and customer). That, in itself, represents a challenge for service organizations to manage.

## 6.2 Service encounter as theatre

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For addressing or managing that challenge, some<sup>1</sup> have drawn on the writings of Erving Goffman, particularly his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*,<sup>2</sup> and portrayed the service encounter as equivalent to a performance in the theatre. In both cases, service encounter and theatre, the aim quite simply is to create a favourable impression before an audience. On the surface the service encounter bears all the hallmarks of a theatrical production:

- **Front stage** – the setting comprising scenery, props, atmosphere. More specifically, décor, lighting, use of space, seating comfort, furnishings, equipment, noise level. (the physical evidence)
- **Front line** – service employees in the role of actors dressed accordingly and with the help of a script deploy the necessary skills and attributes to impress an audience.
- **Audience** – customers with expectations for and perceptions of the performance.
- **Process** – the manner in which the service is delivered and the actions that shape the customers' experience (the performance).

The main problems with the theatre as a framework for discussing and understanding the service encounter is that the customer (in the audience) does not interact or engage directly with those providing the performance. It is essentially a passive encounter with customer response coming at the end of the performance, coupled sometimes with laughter or applause in between. Furthermore, there is little likelihood of other members of the audience affecting the enjoyment or otherwise of the service. Such conditions are not normally characteristic of service encounters. So in considering the following elements of a theatrical nature it is important to bear in mind the impact of customer involvement.<sup>3</sup>

Two particular tools/techniques that emanate from a theatre perspective are however deployed by organizations in the service encounter. They are scripts and emotional labour and each is inextricably bound up with the other.

## 6.3 Scripts

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Just as in the theatre, scripts are widely in evidence in service encounters. A script is regarded as 'a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation'.<sup>4</sup> People experience hundreds of scripts as part of everyday life, e.g. travelling by air, visiting a dentist, eating in a restaurant, attending a tutorial, telephoning a call centre. In these and many other service situations knowledge of the script helps us understand and become involved in the sequence of events as well as how we and others are expected to behave. Basically, we are acquiring knowledge of what is supposed to happen or the rules of engagement. One of the

best-known examples and one to which most people can relate is the restaurant script (see Table 6.1), developed by Schank and Abelson (1977).<sup>5</sup> As with other scripts, it has standard roles to be played, standard props or objects, ordinary conditions for entering upon the activity, a standard sequence of scenes or actions and some normal results from performing the activity successfully.

It appears that the script is a highly structured sequence of actions and events and in many cases that will be so. However, any script will be subject to deviations or violations. Consider the case of a restaurant where the following might occur:<sup>6</sup>

- An **error** – the wrongful completion of a given event (you’ve been served scallops instead of shrimp).
- An **obstacle** – something that removes a precondition for a given event (the waiter can’t give you a menu because there aren’t any or you can’t read the menu as it is in French).
- A **distraction** – an event of sufficient importance to intercept script action (the arrival of a long-lost friend, a fire in the restaurant, waiter spilling soup over the customer).
- **Free behaviours** – those activities that may plausibly and commonly intermix with the ongoing script (but not e.g. throwing Frisbees in a restaurant).

How several of these events or incidents are handled will determine whether the script can get back on track and thus proceed. The impact on customer satisfaction with the service encounter is a further consideration.

### 6.3.1 Script generation

As already intimated, the importance of customer scripts is that they represent customer’s knowledge of what to do for effective participation in the service delivery process. With this in mind, people can be asked to describe what goes on in detail during a variety of service situations. From these descriptions an understanding can be obtained of the level of agreement there is between consumer and organizations on the nature of the characters, props, actions and the order in which they occur. One study<sup>7</sup> of particular interest asked a group of undergraduates to write scripts about common activities. They were given the following instructions (the lecture script will serve as an example):

Write a list of actions describing what people generally do when they go to a lecture in a course. We are interested in the common actions of a routine lecture stereotype. Start the list with arriving at the lecture and end it with leaving after the lecture. Include about 20 actions or events and put them in order in which they would occur.

Results from the study can be seen in Table 6.2. Not surprisingly, given the routine nature of the activities, a considerable measure of agreement was found over the way subjects described events. Nevertheless, for the proper conduct and management of the service encounter both customers and service provider need to agree on the essentials of the script. What is intriguing, given the year of the study and nature of respondents, is whether such agreement would be reached today.

**Table 6.1** Theoretical restaurant script

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Name:	Restaurant	Roles:	Customer
Props:	Tables		Waitress
	Menu		Cook
	Food		Cashier
	Bill		Owner
	Money		
	Tip		
Entry Conditions:	Customer has money	Results:	Customer has less money Owner has more money Customer is not hungry Customer is satisfied/ dissatisfied
Scene 1:	Entering Customer enters restaurant Customer looks for table Customer decides where to sit Customer goes to table Customer sits down		
Scene 2:	Ordering Customer picks up menu Customer looks at menu Customer decides on food Customer signals waitress Waitress comes to table Customer orders food Waitress goes to cook Waitress gives food order to cook Cook prepares food		
Scene 3:	Eating Cook gives food to waitress Waitress brings food to customer Customer eats food		
Scene 4:	Exiting Waitress writes bill Waitress goes over to customer Waitress gives bill to customer Customer gives tip to waitress Customer goes to cashier Customer gives money to cashier Customer leaves restaurant		

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**Table 6.2** Empirical script norms at three agreement levels

<b>Going to a restaurant</b>	<b>Attending a lecture</b>	<b>Getting up</b>	<b>Grocery shopping</b>	<b>Visiting a doctor</b>
Open door	ENTER ROOM	<i>Wake up</i>	ENTER STORE	<i>Enter office</i>
<i>Enter</i>	<i>Look for friends</i>	Turn off alarm	GET CART	CHECK IN WITH RECEPTIONIST
<i>Give reservation name</i>	FIND SEAT	Lie in bed	Take out list	SIT DOWN
Wait to be seated	SIT DOWN	Stretch	Look at list	Wait
Go to table	Settle belongings	GET UP	Go to first aisle	Look at other people
BE SEATED	TAKE OUT NOTEBOOK	Make bed	<i>Go up and down aisles</i>	READ MAGAZINE
<i>Order drinks</i>	<i>Look at other students</i>	<i>Go to bathroom</i>	PICK OUT ITEMS	<i>Name called</i>
Put napkins on lap	<i>Talk</i>	Use toilet	Compare prices	Follow nurse
LOOK AT MENU	Look at professor	<i>Take shower</i>	Put items in cart	<i>Enter exam room</i>
<i>Discuss menu</i>	LISTEN TO PROFESSOR	<i>Wash face</i>	Get meat	Undress
ORDER MEAL	TAKE NOTES	Shave	Look for items forgotten	<i>Sit on table</i>
<i>Talk</i>	CHECK TIME	DRESS	Talk to other shoppers	Talk to nurse
Drink water	Ask questions	Go to kitchen	Go to checkout counters	NURSE TESTS
<i>Eat salad or soup</i>	Change position in seat	Fix breakfast	<i>Find fastest line</i>	Wait
Meal arrives	Daydream	EAT BREAKFAST	WAIT IN LINE	Doctor enters
EAT FOOD	Look at other students	BRUSH TEETH	<i>Put food on belt</i>	Doctor greets
Finish meal	Take more notes	Read paper	Read magazines	Talk to doctor about problem
<i>Order dessert</i>	<i>Close notebook</i>	<i>Comb hair</i>	WATCH CASHIER RING UP	Doctor asks questions
<i>Eat dessert</i>	<i>Gather belongings</i>	<i>Get books</i>	PAY CASHIER	DOCTOR EXAMINES
Ask for bill	Stand up	Look in mirror	<i>Watch bag boy</i>	Get dressed
Bill arrives	Talk	Get coat	Cart bags out	Get medicine
PAY BILL	LEAVE	LEAVE HOUSE	Load bags into car	Make another appointment
Leave tip			LEAVE STORE	LEAVE OFFICE
Get coats				
LEAVE				

Items in all capital letters were mentioned by the most subjects, items in italics by fewer subjects, and items in text type by the fewest subjects  
*Source:* Bower, Black and Turner (1979)<sup>7</sup>

### 6.3.2 The 'value' of the script

The following advantages and problems with regard to the use of a script are worthy of consideration.

#### 1 Advantages

- By standardizing the behaviour and actions of service employees (and customers) scripting could be said to reduce any anxieties that could arise during the service encounter.
- The script could act as a shield against the insults and indignities employees are asked to accept from the public<sup>8</sup> ('Don't take it personally').
- Job definition and responsibilities are clearly specified, lessening the prospect of role ambiguity and role conflict ('I'm sorry but our rules clearly say ...').
- Management is able to exert a degree of control over the service encounter and this can be achieved with a minimum of direct supervision.

#### 2 Problems

- The script can be perceived as mechanical, phoney, contrived, manufactured. It simply is not real. Having to be nice at all times has been portrayed as 'a synthetic, feigned, and ultimately insincere form of friendliness'<sup>9</sup>.
- It can stifle flexibility.
- Customers, consequently, can become frustrated as they seek solutions for their particular circumstances.
- Similarly, employees may feel thwarted by a script in addressing customers' problems.
- While seemingly protecting their dignity, employees may also feel the script undermines their sense of self worth and identity.

## 6.4 Emotional labour

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The concept (and reality) of emotional labour gained prominence with a book by Hochschild (1983) entitled *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. It was defined thus: 'This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others – in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial place.'<sup>10</sup> In effect, emotions of service personnel in contact with customers are encouraged and controlled by the organization. Any feelings (an employee may have) that the organization finds unhelpful are to be suppressed, disregarded or reinterpreted.<sup>11</sup>

Emotional labour has three potential components, of which at least one of the first two must exist along with the third for it to be performed.<sup>12</sup>

- It involves the faking of emotion that is not really felt.
- And/or the hiding of emotion that is felt.
- This emotion management is performed in order to meet social expectation – usually as part of the job role.

Just what constitutes an emotion has been the subject of much discussion. Summaries of primary or fundamental emotions have been identified<sup>13,14</sup> (fear, anger, enjoyment,

sadness, acceptance, disgust, expectancy, surprise, interest, contempt, shame, shyness and guilt). Drawing on a much longer list of emotions,<sup>15</sup> one study sought to examine consumers' emotional experiences across four quite distinct services.<sup>16</sup> Findings from this study suggest that consumers feel and express a range of emotions both positive and negative. Although not part of the study, employees in those services (theatres, dry-cleaning, garages, health/sports centres) would not be free, in accordance with emotional labour, to express any negative emotions regardless of how they feel within.

### 6.4.1 Which jobs involve substantial amounts of emotional labour and how?

Hochschild asserts early in her book *The Managed Heart* that most of us have jobs that involve some way or another the requirements of emotional labour:<sup>17</sup>

- The waitress or waiter who creates an 'atmosphere of pleasant dining'.
- The tour guide or hotel receptionist who makes us feel welcome.
- The social worker whose look of solicitous concern makes the client feel cared for.
- The debt collector who inspires fear.
- The funeral director who makes the bereaved feel understood.

Near the end of her book she appears to review the position cited above by suggesting that 'among those in the professions, service work and clerical work, only selected jobs seem to involve substantial amounts of emotional labour'. (See Table 6.3 for Hochschild's original listings of jobs that involve substantial amounts of emotional labour.) Whilst an update of Hochschild's listings does not appear to have been compiled, the practice of emotional labour through the medium of 'fast-food server' script remains very much in evidence. Practised by, among others, fast-food servers, shop assistants, waiters/waitresses, receptionists and cabin crew, it is characterized by wide smiles, phrases learned by rote, clichéd greetings, long-winded introductions and an inability to cope with unusual requests.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 6.3** Occupations that involve substantial amounts of emotional labour

● Lawyers and judges	● College and university teachers
● Librarians	● Teachers, except college and universities
● Personnel and labour relations	● Vocational and educational counsellors
● Dental hygienists	● Public relations and publicity writers
● Therapy assistants	● Radio and television announcers
● Clergymen and social workers	● Physicians, dentists and related personnel
● Social and recreation workers	

Source: Hochschild (1983)<sup>19</sup>

Whereas the 'fast-food server' approach is regarded as common in service industries, two other approaches are worthy of note in relation to emotional labour. The 'lawyer' script,<sup>20</sup> as the name implies, is reserved for professional service jobs. Here, warm and friendly emotional displays are not appropriate. By masking their emotions

(hiding what may be felt) the professional asserts his/her professionalism. Health service employees (doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, administrators) manage their emotions with a view to remaining cool and objective. Medical students learn the art of 'detached concern',<sup>21</sup> where they convey concern but remain sufficiently aloof to retain their impartiality. Lawyers learn to act aggressively in court on behalf of their clients without having or showing confused and inconsistent feelings about the actual guilt of their client.<sup>22</sup>

Where followers of the 'lawyer' script need only hide their feelings, those operating under the 'fast-food server' are invariably required to hide what they feel (anger, irritation) and fake what they do not feel (enthusiasm, polite demeanour).

Furthermore, the professionals in the 'lawyer' script usually supervise their own emotional labour. Contrast that with the fast-food server whose emotions are dictated from above by management. The third script has been termed the 'debt collector'<sup>23</sup> and depicted as 'Have a rotten day'. It is stated as being characteristic of particular services (debt collectors, bouncers, security personnel) where the aim is one of discouraging certain attitudes and behaviours, e.g. unruly conduct, non-compliance with demands. Through the display of emotions such as anger, irritation or disapproval (by the service organizations) the consequent anxiety experienced (by the targets of these displays) will result in compliance. That, in theory, is how such rarely mentioned service encounters are deemed to work. Whereas, the 'Have a rotten day' is limited to a select number of services it may gather momentum and spread to other services. The following anecdote could be an experience that an unknown number of customers over a range of service situations may have felt or will feel in future:

I needed a tax disc for my car and whenever I have to renew my disc, I have to travel twenty minutes in the car during the working day to my nearest main post office. Why I can't get the disc at my local post office, I don't know. Anyway, I went and queued for twenty minutes and finally reached the front desk. I produced all the documentation, only to be told, somewhat gleefully, that I had brought my insurance schedule instead of the certificate. I was pretty upset and fed up – I was late for work and would not be able to return. The counter staff's attitude was 'tough'. She just didn't even pretend to care. If I had any choice, I would not have returned to that post office.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike the fast-food server approach, the attitude/behaviour in the above anecdote is not liable to be enshrined in company policy or endorsed by management. As for why it occurs, two observations are worth making and they are interrelated. First, as you will read in Chapter 10 under 'Consumer Participation and Productivity', consumers of services vary in the extent to which they prepare properly for a forthcoming service encounter. In the renewal of a tax disc story the customer, for whatever reason, had failed to bring the correct documentation even though clear notification of what to bring is provided in advance. As is the case in this example, the customer is a direct contributor to the efficiency and the effectiveness of the service. Secondly many services set rules and often deliver 'subject to certain conditions'.

Where rules and conditions must be enforced, failure to comply on the part of customers gives front-line employees a sense of control in the service encounter greater than usual. Such control might then give rise to the expression 'tough'. Whilst 'tough'



implied an uncaring attitude in the post office story, it also conveys a sarcastic, if not triumphal swipe at the consumer by way of Too bad! Tough luck! Hard cheese! It may also serve to redress employee feelings of subordination in the service encounter. Whether or not this type of script ('debt collector') will become more prominent, it has been acknowledged that there are many workers whose jobs require them to flit from one script to another,<sup>25</sup> e.g. a team of nurses who were expected to present an emotionally flat demeanour ('lawyer' script) in the operating room, to be caring and friendly ('fast-food server' script) when talking to patients and their families and to let their real feelings of rage or disgust ('debt collector') out during breaks or informal meetings.<sup>26</sup>

The other party in the service encounter is, of course, the customer. How do they perceive emotional labour?<sup>27</sup> The key word in all of this is *sincerity*, which means honesty, trustfulness, straightforwardness, openness. In a service where things can go wrong, being honest and open about the reasons may not be in the interests of the organization. Even in the marketing of a service truth may be a casualty. Being sincere could be damaging and hurtful for the parties involved. Sincerity it would appear must be 'tempered by tact, courtesy and convention'.<sup>28</sup> By 'sugar-coating' relationships emotional labour is designed to appear sincere but perceived as insincere by customers, e.g. the fake smile. As one critic noted, 'human interactions that are mass-produced may strike consumers as dehumanising if the routinization is obvious, or manipulative if it is not'.<sup>29</sup> Emotional labour as we know is largely an expression of niceness, symbolized by the "'Have a nice day" (Hand)'.<sup>30</sup>

When confronted with the stark choice between fake niceness and downright rudeness, the niceties apparently have been found to invariably win.<sup>30</sup> Even when consumers are aware of it being faked, niceness is still preferred. However, the challenge for service organizations is whether that view can be sustained over a desire by consumers for feelings to be authentically felt and communicated.

## 6.5 The critical incident technique

Organizations need to know what customers expect from the service experience. In particular they need to study what goes on during the service encounter to see if it lives up to expectations. A method suited to achieving that objective is known as the critical incident technique. Critical incidents are events and behaviours that have been observed to lead to success or failure in accomplishing a specific task. It was developed by Flanagan (1954)<sup>31</sup> for identifying requirements for effective job performance. He described it as a procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning behaviour in defined situations. In his view critical incidents were defined as extreme behaviour, either outstandingly effective or ineffective with respect to attaining the general aims of an activity. In his 1954 paper he cites many studies and makes reference to situations that are clearly significant for services, particularly service employees, e.g. what are the critical requirements for dentists,<sup>32</sup> what does successful work as a nurse include and what do sales clerks do that makes them especially effective or ineffective?

Critical incidents in a service context have been widely studied (e.g. Bitner *et al.*, 1990,<sup>33</sup> Stauss, 1993,<sup>34</sup> Gilbert and Morris, 1995,<sup>35</sup> Hoffman *et al.*, 1995,<sup>36</sup> Chell and Pittaway, 1998,<sup>37</sup> Chung and Hoffman, 1998,<sup>38</sup> Chung-Herrera *et al.*, 2004,<sup>39</sup> Gremler,

2004<sup>40</sup>). A major attraction of this technique is that it allows the customer to identify and recall specific events and behaviours during the service encounter that were particularly satisfying or dissatisfying. Contrast this with the customer questionnaire, where the organization specifies the areas on which it wants feedback. Whilst the critical incident method usually concentrates on customer/employee interactions it is important to remember that the technique has a wider reference. Customers can be given an opportunity to express their feelings towards any contacts they may have with a service, e.g. clarity of signage, accuracy and intelligibility of bills, comfort of waiting areas, cleanliness of toilets etc. These and many others are known as 'moments of truth', giving rise to positive or negative evaluations.

Several methods can be used to collect critical incidents:

- 1 **Interview:** this may be conducted either face to face or by telephone. Two questions may suffice:
  - Think of a time when you gained a particularly satisfying or dissatisfying impression of the service at hotel X.
  - Please describe in detail the circumstances of the incident.
 Further questions may need to be asked:
  - Exactly what happened?
  - Where and when did the incident occur?
  - What exactly made you feel the incident was satisfying or dissatisfying?
  - How did you respond to the incident?
- 2 **Self-completion:** the above or similar points could be put together in a printed form for customers to complete and return (see Figure 6.1).
- 3 **Group interviews:** a group of people is brought together and then split into pairs. One person in the pair acts as the interviewer and elicits and records a service incident from the other person. The roles are then reversed. Participants continue until they run out of incidents or time. As for the number of incidents to be collected there are no strict rules. Around 100 incidents allows you to have confidence in moving to the next stage, categorization.

Critical Incident Report Form	
Where and when did the incident occur?	
Who and/or what was involved?	
Description of the incident?	
Critical points	
Was it satisfying or dissatisfying?	

**Figure 6.1** Example of a Critical Incident Report Form

Once the incidents have been collected, the analysis begins. All the incidents will be grouped into categories. The naming of the categories will probably arise from the content of the incidents. Alternatively categories may be developed in advance with the danger that they may not reflect the data. An example of a category could be employee competence. In the study of dentists cited earlier the incidents were classified into four main aspects of the job: demonstrating technical proficiency, handling patient relationships, accepting professional responsibility and accepting personal responsibility. A major piece of research in the restaurant, hotel and airline industries identified categories of events and behaviours that underline critical service encounters from the customer's point of view. In all, 700 incidents were collected and analysed.<sup>41</sup> An update examined the employee's perspective of what underlies customer satisfaction.<sup>42</sup> This was a significant development in services as hitherto the main focus had been the customer. If the reasons for poor quality are to be understood, all the relevant parties to the encounter should be considered. Not only might they report different incidents but also incidents mentioned by more than one party might be interpreted differently. This could be particularly insightful when it comes to apportioning blame for dissatisfying encounters.

Bitner *et al.* in their 1994 research drew on a number of theories that might further our understanding. In the case of role and script theory there is likely to be greater agreement between the parties where these are clearly defined and the parties concerned know what to expect. For attribution theory dissimilarities in viewpoint may arise when service encounter participants have conflicting views of the underlying causes, that is when their attributions differ. Most clearly for the perceptions of service providers and customers is the self-serving attribution bias. This is the tendency for people to take credit for success (i.e. to give internal attribution for their successes, a self-enhancing bias) and deny responsibility for failure (i.e. to blame failure on external circumstances, a self-protecting bias). Given these biases employees are expected to blame the system or the customer for service failures, whereas the customer would be more likely to blame the system or the employee. The result would be different views of the causes of service dissatisfaction. In the opinion of Bitner, it is less clear that this bias would operate in the case of a service encounter success. Responses in a critical incident study however can shed enormous light on the performance of the entire service delivery system.

The use of the critical incident technique in services suggests further the inappropriateness of the theatre analogy. Negative, dissatisfactory experiences are as much a product of the service encounter as positive, satisfactory ones. Consumers expect only enjoyment from a theatrical performance. Further points are worthy of consideration:

- Much use of the argument favouring service as theatre rests on the assertion that the service a customer receives is essentially a performance. However, theatrical performances are carefully choreographed and managed, seamlessly delivered. Although services may set out to operate in like manner, they are subject to interruption when things go wrong. If the theatrical metaphor is to be retained, customers may describe some service performances as more akin to pantomime.
- Once the curtain is raised in the theatre, silence falls over the audience. The consumers in that audience are there to observe and appreciate the skills of the actors. In a typical service encounter customers may express appreciation but also, among

other things, cynicism and angst at what is on offer. What is missing in the theatrical metaphor is the potential for conflict between service provider and service recipient.

- Some advocates of the 'service is theatre' proposition observe that:

To many people, the drama metaphor may carry the dangerous connotation of superficial 'just acting' behaviours. The 'have a nice day' phrase so dutifully mouthed by the employees of many service businesses is woefully insincere. It is imperative that the customer believe in the performance. If the public believes that a service business is presenting a 'false front' they may quickly take their patronage elsewhere. Service marketers should recognize the importance of honest actors and authentic performances.<sup>43</sup>

It is not clear whether in calling for more honesty and authenticity, the authors are arguing for services to be more or less like the theatre. Moreover, 'honest actors and authentic performances' appear to be contradictions. Acting is behaving in a way that is not genuine and performances, in a theatrical context, equally so. Acting is an illusion. Whereas the professional actor may only fool others (customers), the front-line service employee also fools him/herself. And that, according to Hochschild, can be particularly 'unsettling'.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the reference to customers taking their business elsewhere as a consequence of 'false fronts' is not borne out by the evidence, however limited.

- Finally, as Hochschild perceptively notes, 'acting (emotional labour) in a commercial setting, unlike acting in a dramatic context, makes one's face and one's feelings take on the properties of a resource. But it is not a resource to be used for the purposes of art, as in drama. It is a resource to be used to make money'.<sup>45</sup> It is thus a monetary exploitation of, in many cases, a low paid, low status employee. Contrast this with the skill and craft of the professional actor for whom personal fulfilment outweighs commercial exploitation.

## 6.6 Dysfunctional customers, deviant employees – an everyday occurrence in the service encounter?

The service encounter has been portrayed as a harmonious experience in which the service provider strives to meet customers' needs and expectations and they, in turn, depart largely satisfied. It is a portrayal that is still evident in practice, guided by the principle, 'The Customer is King'. But there is another reality emerging. It is one of customers 'acting in a thoughtless or abusive way, causing problems for the firm, its employees and other customers'.<sup>46</sup> Customers who act in this way have variously been described as jay customers,<sup>47</sup> problem customers,<sup>48</sup> deviant,<sup>49</sup> and aberrant.<sup>50</sup> Collectively, they are deemed to be dysfunctional customers who do not abide by the rules and regulations of an organization and generally accepted standards of behaviour. Worryingly there is evidence that the majority (and not the minority) of customers exhibit this type of behaviour.<sup>51,52</sup> Not surprisingly, those who engage in it have been branded 'Customers From Hell'.<sup>53</sup>

All of this appears to undermine the concept of customer sovereignty. The customer is not always right and frequently is seen to be wrong. However, we must exercise care. Whilst acknowledging the rise in verbal and physical abuse of employees across a range of service industries, we must also attend to the causes. Reporting in the media suggests a general erosion of civility in society. According to a survey by advertising agency Publicis,<sup>54</sup> people are less afraid of asserting themselves, with 92% agreeing we are more willing to say what we think. As Paul Edwards of Publicis notes, 'We are rejecting the British stiff upper lip in favour of more European behaviour – verbally and emotionally demonstrative, but most of all petulant. The report, entitled 'Petulance: "If you can't get even, get mad"' cites the roots of petulance:

- We don't seem to be told the truth anymore.
- We get 'spin' from politicians and companies, which enrages us.
- We work the longest hours in Europe so we are tired.
- We are faced with increasing rules and regulations (the 'nanny state').
- We interact more with machines.
- We have more money which gives us more confidence to speak out.

Echoing the findings from Publicis, Mintel's 2005 British lifestyles report<sup>55</sup> shows Britain harbouring a new breed of Briton – the rebellious consumer. Across both reports, banks, shopping and commuting by train come in for particular criticism.

Although there are people (who knows how many) who are predisposed (in terms of personality) to behaving aggressively, the growing trend of customer misbehaviour merits further explanation, not least for addressing the effects on service employees, namely feelings of degradation, worthlessness and humiliation.<sup>56</sup> We must look to the conduct of the service. Research carried out into the growing incidence of customer violence in the airline and railway industries considered that:

the main reasons identified by respondents as the triggers and causes of passenger violence were alcohol, delays, a lack of information provided to passengers during delays, the quality of environmental surroundings, disputes over baggage and the failure to meet customer expectations. All of these causes are controlled and exacerbated by management policy, with the most notable case being the sale of alcohol on aircraft and trains. Profit maximization and cost minimization appear to take priority over the safety and health of employees.<sup>57</sup>

In a scene from a recent advertisement for Nambarrie tea, customers are portrayed as turning the tables by recording their own mind-numbing tunes to play back to the service companies after asking phone operators to hold for just a moment! Some time then elapses for the making of the tea at which point the customer returns to thank the service for holding and acknowledging its 'valued customer status'! The customer now becomes the tormentor. One group of customer service advisers has surveyed clients to discover ingenious ways of getting revenge (Box 6.1).

Employees are not exempt from criticism, invariably cited for being rude, discourteous and unknowledgeable. Service research, according to one view,<sup>58</sup> has ignored the potential for intentional, front-line anti-service behaviour and has assumed that customer contact service employees have a positive orientation to their work. Others

### Box 6.1 Customer revenge

Sick of piped music and being told ‘Your call is important to us,’ before you’re ignored again? Tired of having to go right back to the beginning when a voice automated system can’t understand what you have to say? Or perhaps next time you go on holiday delays will see you camped out in departures and not on the beach as planned? Maybe you are left starving on the plane when the crew runs out of Pringles?

Research conducted by us in association with the Marketing Forum has shown that more than half of a customer experience is based on emotion. Therefore organizations such as Call Centres and airline companies are leaving their customers frustrated and annoyed.

Whilst customer revenge can leave you feeling triumphant, we would recommend only using companies who have real people to answer the phone or at the check-in desk – this is indicative of the customer-focus of the company. Bad service in the early stages of a customer relationship is often just a taster of what is yet to come.

We have observed that through reality TV, consumers are wising up to the hard line methods of the airlines and are now starting to get their own back on the operators who can turn holidays to hell before they’ve even started.

For example, we have now identified ‘coping strategies’ used by passengers to deal with frustrations and inadequacies of everyday airport life. These include ‘**Fast-Track**’, where passengers deliberately turn up late – but just in time – to be whisked through at the last moment, avoiding all the chaos of check-in and the departure lounge. ‘**Check-in Cheating**’, when members of a large group of holidaymakers split up and move to different queues, then move en masse, like locusts towards the ‘best’ queue. Finally, with unallocated seats becoming a common policy, ‘**Deterrent Techniques**’ such as passengers feigning coughing fits to ensure that they end up with an empty seat (or two) next to them, are also being used by desperate holidaymakers!

I have recently unveiled Naïve to Natural<sup>®</sup>, a new model which maps out the four stages of Customer Experience orientation: Naïve, Transactional, Enlightened and Natural. In my book, *Revolutionise Your Customer Experience*, I use the N2N model to enable any customer-facing body to complete the journey by achieving best practice Customer Experience for all managers and organizations.

Companies need to stop cutting corners if they are going to keep their customers happy – because they will only respond by trying to do the same thing.

*Colin Shaw*  
Customer Experience Guru and  
CEO of Customer Experience Consultancy,  
Beyond Philosophy

see such anti-service behaviour as a product of working conditions (work overload, role conflict, role ambiguity) that lead to frustration.

Whilst it is important to single out the factors in a service that cause dissatisfaction, it is doubly important to acknowledge how failure in these factors makes

**Table 6.4** Categories of primary appraisal and associated examples

Primary appraisal (What is at stake)	Examples from service incidents causing dissatisfaction
Physical well-being	'I was worried about the results [of the X-ray] ... I wanted to know what was going on.' 'I was getting hungry and really tired.'
Self-esteem	'... they couldn't be bothered with me.' 'I didn't feel like they were really interested in me.'
Security	'I felt really exposed.' 'I felt really vulnerable.'
Justice	'I felt we had been cheated ...' 'I had paid for a room with a shower and I wanted the shower working.' 'It was the dishonesty of the whole thing ...'
Belonging	'I felt like I didn't belong here ... I felt really uncomfortable.' 'We were completely ignored ...'
Well-being of a significant other	'... they gave alcoholic drinks to my ten year old step son and his two friends.'

customers feel (apart from being simply dissatisfied). One study<sup>59</sup> points us in an interesting direction for understanding why customers behave aggressively. The authors advise service providers of the need to understand the psycho-social benefits of the exchange (service encounter) as well as the functional aspects. To achieve this, service providers need to appreciate exactly what is at stake for the consumer during the encounter, such as self-esteem, a need to belong and/or a need for security or justice. Table 6.4 illustrates some of their findings.

Feelings of injustice, feelings of being wronged, can drive customers to take what many might regard as extreme action. In one case in the recent past a farmer was so enraged by his treatment at his bank that he sprayed muck over his local branch. Frustration and annoyance are now prompting customers to retaliate, or take revenge, as it is now more widely known.

Employees, also, are not averse to their own acts of revenge, or sabotage<sup>60</sup> as it is known, in response to difficult encounters with customers. Sabotage has been the subject of study recently in the hotel and catering industry. Just as customers might behave aggressively (as you will read below), employees equally will act antisocially as a demonstration against perceived subjugation by both management and customers. In the hotel and catering research the writers identify the causes and consequences of sabotage behaviour together with numerous accounts from front-line staff of sabotage in action. Two examples from this research illustrate acts of employee revenge towards customers:

Many customers are rude or difficult, not polite like you or I. Getting your own back evens the score. There are lots of things that you do that no one but you will ever know – smaller portions, dodgy wine, a bad beer – all that and you serve it with a smile! Sweet revenge!

The trick is to get them and then straight away launch into the apologies. I've seen it done thousands of times – burning hot plates into someone's hands, gravy dripped on sleeves, drinks spilt on backs, wigs knocked off – that was funny – soups spilt in laps, you get the idea!

At times, from within the prison of subjugation and subordination, service employees are able to reclaim a sense of dignity and self-respect.<sup>61</sup> The following example is simply illustrative:

The perfect way to deal with unpleasant 'Do you know who I am?' type of customers. An award should go to the United Airlines gate agent in Denver for being smart and funny, and making her point, when confronted with a passenger who probably deserved to fly as cargo. During the final days at Denver's old Stapleton airport, a crowded United flight was cancelled. A single agent was rebooking a long line of inconvenienced travellers. Suddenly an angry passenger pushed his way to the desk. He slapped his ticket down on the counter and said, 'I HAVE to be on this flight, it has to be FIRST CLASS'. The agent replied, 'I'm sorry sir. I'll be happy to try to help you, but I've got to help these folks first, and I'm sure we'll be able to work something out.' The passenger was unimpressed. He asked loudly, so that the passengers behind him could hear, 'Do you have any idea who I am?' Without hesitating, the gate agent smiled and grabbed her public address microphone. 'May I have your attention please?' she began, her voice bellowing throughout the terminal. 'We have a passenger here at the gate WHO DOES NOT KNOW WHO HE IS. If anyone can help him find his identity, please come to gate 17.' With the folks behind him in line laughing hysterically, the man glared at the United agent, gritted his teeth and swore '[Expletive] you.' Without flinching, she smiled and said, 'I'm sorry sir, but you'll have to stand in line for that, too.' The man retreated as the people in the terminal applauded loudly. Although the flight was cancelled and people were late, they were no longer angry at United. (Jill Colonna@OECD.org at internet-gateway)

Acts of revenge and sabotage are receiving more attention in the services literature, the media and from various consultancy organizations. Whether it gathers further momentum remains to be seen. The service encounter is evidently not as smooth running as we have traditionally been led to believe. Will it become even more fractious?

## Summary

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In this chapter we have addressed what can turn out to be a thorny issue, namely the service encounter. This is the point at which customers come into contact, in one form or another, with the service organization. To assist our understanding of this encounter some have likened it to a theatrical performance. Although there are lessons to be learnt from the theatre, the unpredictability and variability of customer behaviour and attitudes suggests that this analogy is not completely accurate.



From the service organization point of view the use of scripts and emotional labour are important components for delivery and performance. Customers, on the other hand, can find being on the receiving end of these techniques frustrating and humiliating. Service employees are also not exempt from such feelings.

Given the importance of the service encounter, one technique gathering interest is the critical incident. Use of this technique enables services to determine what customers, in particular, found satisfying or dissatisfying in the service encounter.

Finally, we draw attention to a growing trend of service encounters as a sector for disagreeable behaviour. This trend represents a real challenge for service organizations.

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