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Customer evaluation of service employee's customer orientation: extension and application

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Abstract

Past research indicates that customer orientation is related to positive outcomes for the firm. Customer orientation has typically been measured by self-reports from service employees. Research indicates, however, that customers may not perceive employees to be as customer oriented as employees perceive themselves to be. This study extends past research by measuring perceptions of customer-oriented behaviors from the customer's perspective, not from the employee's perspective. Results from data gathered from 219 restaurant customers provide empirical evidence that perceptions of the contact employee's customer-oriented behaviors were positively related to two positive outcomes: (1) customer satisfaction with the service encounter and (2) customer commitment to the firm. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

For years, the marketing concept has been accepted as a cornerstone of the marketing discipline. McNamara (1972, p. 51) defines the marketing concept as “a philosophy of

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business management, based upon a company-wide acceptance of the need for customer orientation, . . .” The implementation of the marketing concept philosophy can be seen through the behaviors of employees working for an organization. “Market orientation” and “customer orientation” are terms that have been used to describe the implementation of the marketing concept (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990).

Customer orientation has been seen as a fundamental concept to the theory and practice of marketing management (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). It has been well established that customer-oriented firms outperform competitors and provide greater customer satisfaction (Narver & Slater, 1990). However, researchers indicate that there has been little empirical attention that looks at the critical linkage between customer orientation and customer perceptions of services offered by a firm (Day & Wensley, 1988; Walker & Ruekert, 1987). Recently, Brady and Cronin (2001, p. 241) state “. . . although theory and some empirical research support the assumed or implied relationship between a customer orientation and business performance, the fundamental question as to how a customer orientation influences perceived performance from a *customer’s perspective* has yet to be addressed.”

Several authors have investigated customer orientation of service employees. Brown, Mowen, Donovan, and Licata (in press) described customer orientation as a personality variable that reflects the service worker’s disposition to meet customer needs. These authors proposed that an employee’s customer-oriented disposition is positively related to both the supervisors’ ratings of overall performance and the service workers’ self-evaluation of overall performance. However, Dunlap, Dotson, and Chambers (1988) found evidence to suggest that customers do not perceive service providers to be as customer-oriented as the provider perceived themselves to be.

On the other hand, Donovan, Brown, and Mowen (2001) found that a service worker’s customer orientation is related to the employee’s functional service performance (i.e., process quality) and technical service performance (i.e., outcome quality) as rated by supervisors. While supervisors may be skilled at evaluating service worker performance, Deshpande, Farley, and Webster (1993) suggested that the firm’s level of customer orientation should be assessed by customers instead. For example, supervisor’s evaluations of performance may be based in part on other peripheral aspects such as getting along with the boss rather than performance with the customer.

This study extends previous research by focusing on consumer’s (rather than employee or supervisor) evaluations of perceived customer-oriented behaviors as exhibited by front-line service employees. This research examines the impact that customer-oriented behaviors might have on two positive outcomes: (1) customer satisfaction and (2) commitment to the service firm. Kelley (1992, p. 27) argued that customer-oriented employees would “engage in behaviors that increase satisfaction of their customers . . . [lead to the] development of long-term relationships.”

In addition, this study extends previous research in a second manner: validation of a customer orientation scale that was developed for employees of service firms. While the Donovan et al. (2001) scale was developed to measure the customer orientation disposition of service employees in several service environments, we argue that customers can accurately evaluate these dispositions based on the behaviors they witness during a service encounter.

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