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The effects of salesperson mood, shopper behavior, and store type on customer service

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Abstract

This paper proposes that salesperson mood, shopper behavior, and store type have significant effects on the level of customer service provided by a store. Results from a laboratory experiment reveal that salespeople enjoy unpleasant shoppers *less* but serve them *more*. Salespeople in a good mood are more uniform in their delivery of customer service, while those in a bad mood are more likely to provide poor service to pleasant than to unpleasant customers. The study also reveals that department-store salespeople provide a more uniform level of customer service than discount-store salespeople. Conclusions and management implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Virtually all marketing studies of mood have focused on its effect on the consumer. However, mood affects more than the customers in a shopping transaction, including the service providers in stores—the salespeople. A salesperson in a good mood may provide quite a different level of customer service than one in a bad mood. For example, suppose a store sales associate has just concluded a trying transaction with a shopper who is hostile and attacking. The sales associate is now approached by another shopper—even a pleasant shopper—who seeks some service. How will the salesperson feel about this shopper? How will the salesperson *respond* to this shopper? Will the hostile shopper have influenced the salesperson's treatment of the pleasant shopper? And will there be differences by store type—i.e., will discount-store salespeople respond differently than their department-store counterparts?

These are among the issues addressed by this study. Though salesperson mood is often beyond the retailer's control (Gardner and Vandersteel, 1984), it may dramatically affect responses to shoppers, and can be influenced with the appropriate organizational structure and climate. Salesperson mood may influence their store performance in both shopper-relevant ways (including their attitudes toward shoppers, their willingness to

provide any assistance at all, and their willingness to provide extra service); their performance in other store assignments (quality of effort given to stocking, taking inventory, making markdowns, setting displays); and their morale, satisfaction, and thereby longevity with the job.

The purpose of this paper is to examine such effects. In particular, it addresses these questions:

- What is the influence of salesperson mood on their own experience with shoppers?
- What is the influence of salesperson mood on their *treatment* of shoppers?
- Do shoppers have an influence on salesperson mood? and
- Does salesperson mood have different effects on customer service in a department store than in a discount store?

2. Development of hypotheses

2.1. The concept of mood

Gardner (1985) described mood as a phenomenological property of a person's subjectively perceived affective state. It is a mild, transient (Isen et al., 1976; Schellenberg and Blevins, 1973), generalized and pervasive affective state (Isen, 1984), not an intense emotion, and not directed at specific target objects (Clark and

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Isen, 1982). Mood is characterized as occurring in specific times and situations (Peterson and Sauber, 1983), as opposed to a more permanent feeling state, and it is generalized, having no particular target (Fiske, 1981).

2.2. Effects of mood

Mood is likely to be important in at least three marketing situations (Gardner, 1985):

- pre-existing consumer mood may influence response to marketing stimuli—for example, moods may influence product satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Isen et al., 1980), and conversely,
- marketing stimuli may be used to purposefully influence consumer moods (e.g., affective results of exposure to persuasive messages), and
- mood may be a nuisance factor, contributing to unexplained variance in marketing studies (Peterson and Sauber, 1983).

Large numbers of studies have shown mood to have significant effects. A substantial body of literature has found that positive moods foster prosocial behavior in a variety of settings (George, 1991; Rosenhan et al., 1981). Positive moods make one kinder (Underwood et al., 1973; Isen and Levin, 1972), more generous (Berkowitz and Connor, 1966), more resistant to temptation (Fry, 1975), and more willing to delay self-rewards (Moore et al., 1976). In general, positive mood has been shown to positively influence spontaneous interpersonal conduct (George, 1991). Negative moods¹ cause greater dislike for peers (Berkowitz and Connor, 1966), less volunteering (Aderman, 1972; Isen and Levin, 1972), smaller charitable contributions (Underwood et al., 1973), less resistance to temptation (Fry, 1975), and less willingness to delay self-rewards (Moore et al., 1976).

In addition, mood appears to have a substantial influence in retail service encounters. Gardner (1985) and others (Isen et al., 1978; Westbrook, 1980) observed that the effect of mood—either that of the shopper or of the salesperson—may have special impact in retailing encounters because of their interpersonal or dyadic nature.

¹Conclusions about negative-mood effects are not without their detractors, however, and the observed effects of negative moods have been less consistent than those of positive moods. For example, Cialdini's negative state relief model of helping (Kenrick et al., 1979; Cialdini and Kenrick, 1976; Cialdini et al., 1973) argues that people in a negative mood will behave *more* charitably than others if the opportunity has potential for direct social or egoistic approval. This suggests that helping behavior is a complex phenomenon not fully addressed by simple explanations such as mood states.

Following from the above, compared with those in bad moods, salespeople in good moods should both have more positive affect toward shoppers and should provide better customer service. These ideas suggest the first two hypotheses:

- H₁ Salespeople in a good mood will have a more positive affective experience with a shopper than those in a bad mood.
- H₂ Salespeople in a good mood will provide better customer service than those in a bad mood.

2.3. Effects of shopper behavior

2.3.1. Shopper/mood interactions

People in good moods (but not bad) have mechanisms to maintain their mood (Batra and Stayman, 1990; Mackie and Worth, 1989; Worth and Mackie, 1987; Schaller and Cialdini, 1990). However, these moods may deteriorate over time or because of external events; thus people in good moods may lose their feelings of well-being, and so sales associates in good moods who are then confronted by especially negative shoppers may have that feeling of well-being evaporate, for two reasons (Swinyard, 1993):

- their mood-protection mechanisms may fail. Exposure to negative shoppers may invoke cognitive elaboration of the negative material, which disrupts positive moods (Isen and Levin, 1972), and
- their good mood may be deteriorated by the negative stimuli, replaced by a neutral or even negative mood, making avoidance of negative thoughts more difficult.

Mood is a generalized, diffuse, fleeting condition, subject to change as situations change. Just as researchers have influenced the moods of their subjects by having them rehearse happy or sad thoughts, with pleasant music, or by having them unexpectedly find change in a phone booth, so can such events influence our moods daily. In particular, store salespeople are no doubt occasionally surprised by an especially pleasant or unpleasant shopper, which could influence their mood. If the encounter is especially negative, it may cause a positive mood to evaporate into a neutral or even negative one (Swinyard, 1993). Thus the salesperson's initial good mood could be destroyed and he/she might begin responding more similarly to salespeople in a bad mood. That is, the good mood of a salesperson who is then confronted by an offensive shopper, should evaporate with the salesperson then responding much the same as others.

These thoughts suggest the third hypothesis:

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