

Is “service with a smile” enough? Authenticity of positive displays during service encounters

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Abstract

Service providers use impression management strategies to engender satisfaction and repeat business in customers. Managing emotional expressions is one strategy to meet those goals. We extended research on the “Duchenne Smile” to see if authenticity of employee expressions influenced the impressions formed of the employee’s friendliness and the overall satisfaction with the encounter. Furthermore, we took two other factors into account—task performance and busyness—to examine the conditions under which authenticity would have the greatest impact. In Study 1, we obtained reactions to videotaped simulations that manipulated authenticity of positive displays and task performance during a hotel check-in encounter. ANCOVA results supported that authenticity of the service provider enhanced perceptions of friendliness, but only influenced customer satisfaction when tasks were performed well. In Study 2, hierarchical linear modeling with reactions from 255 customers of 64 restaurant servers showed that perceived display authenticity enhanced the perceived friendliness of the employee when the store was slow, but less so when it was busy. Display authenticity had a direct effect on customer satisfaction, regardless of task performance (which was generally high) and busyness. We conclude that display authenticity is an extra-role behavior for service encounters with an additive effect on encounter satisfaction only when other factors are at optimal levels. We suggest implications for display rule policies and service training.

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“Your troubles should be masked with a smile...once an unhappy or dissatisfied customer walks out the door, they are gone forever!”—from a customer service handbook (Steinberg & Figart, 1999).

“The more the heart is managed, the more we value the unmanaged heart” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 192).

Policy statements such as the first quote make it clear that in service encounters smiles need to be displayed, whether they are authentically felt or not, to obtain satisfied customers (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Ironically, however, others have proposed that positive displays that are inauthentic undermine the assumed benefits of “service with a smile” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000). In fact, experimental research has shown that reactions to an inauthentic display are less positive than to an authentic, or Duchenne, smile (e.g., Ekman, 1992; Ekman & Friesen, 1982; Frank, Ekman, & Friesen, 1993). This

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suggests that the service requirement for positive displays is insufficient for the benefits to occur; however, researchers have pointed out that minimal empirical attention has been given to how authenticity enhances or minimizes the effects of positive displays (Pugh, 2001; Tsai, 2001; Tsai & Huang, 2002). As stated in the second quote, as organizations make more efforts to control emotional displays of employees, the value of authenticity may be at a premium. Thus, both experimental emotion research and customer service theories suggest that authenticity enhances reactions to service encounters.

Though authentic (Duchenne) smiles may enhance customer reactions, other encounter factors may act as a boundary on this effect. The Duchenne smile research is primarily examined in laboratory settings simulating social encounters (e.g., Frank et al., 1993; Surakka & Hietanen, 1998) where the focus of the observer is on the interpersonal behaviors. In service encounters, the purpose of the encounter is to receive some product or service; thus, many other factors besides interpersonal demeanor are also critical to target reactions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998). Perhaps authenticity is less critical to target reactions when the reason for the exchange is economic; conversely, perhaps authenticity becomes even *more* important when money is changing hands. The effect of authenticity is also less well understood in dynamic and realistic encounters since it is often studied with photos or written vignettes. Perhaps authenticity only emerges as important when all other distractions are controlled but has minimal influence in a dynamic and realistic interaction. In response to these unknowns, many researchers have called for attention to authenticity in service encounters (Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000; Côté & Morgan, 2002; Mattila & Enz, 2002; Pugh, 2001; Tsai & Huang, 2002).

Thus, we attempted to extend the experimental research on Duchenne smiles by Ekman and colleagues by examining the power of authentic positive displays to influence reactions under realistic conditions. In particular, we used service encounters as a dyadic interaction in which certain factors—the quality of the task performance and the busyness of the service context—may enhance or minimize the impact of authenticity. The impression management and extra-role behaviors literature is used to propose hypotheses and results from both a laboratory experiment and a survey field study are presented. In addition to extending and applying theory on authentic displays, this research is important for practical reasons. As stated in the introductory quote, there may be only one opportunity to win over a customer in a service encounter. Studying reactions to a single encounter provides useful information to practitioners about the most important aspects for a quality service encounter.

Authenticity as impression management and extra-role behavior in service encounters

Impression management is a critical part of the service provider's role. He, or more likely, she, is often the first and only person with whom the public ever interacts. The service provider represents the company to the public; thus the company has a vested interest in impressions being managed well by the service provider (Albrecht & Zemke, 1985; Grove & Fisk, 1989). According to impression management theorists, one can strategically create a positive impression by appearing both *competent* and *likeable* (Jones & Pittman, 1980; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). In the service setting, expertise/competence is one of the dimensions of interaction quality of service encounters (Czepiel, Solomon, & Surprenant, 1985; Gronroos, 1990), and employees manage impressions of competence by being efficient, available, accurate, and knowledgeable about products (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1991). Another key dimension of interaction quality is the service providers' positive attitude and demeanor (Czepiel et al., 1985; Gronroos, 1990). Positive displays and friendliness enhance overall service quality (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Tsai & Huang, 2002); thus, service organizations attempt to manage employees' positive displays as well as their task-based skills for encounters with customers.

Organizations use a variety of techniques to control service employees' positive displays, including training, monitoring, and rewards (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Display requirements as specific as providing a smile and maintaining eye contact with customers for three seconds are enforced by secret shoppers and the fear of being sent to "smile school" (Curtis, 1998). However, the *quality* of the smile is more difficult to enforce. Providing "service with a smile" meets the job requirements, and employees may do the minimum required of them by simply pasting on a fake smile. Others, however, may put in the effort to remain positive and enthusiastic throughout the workday. Thus, we argue that the extent that these required displays seem *authentically* positive is at the discretion of the employee. As such, it provides a source of variance within positive displays that may help explain customer reactions. In particular, authentic positive displays are proposed as discretionary behaviors that go beyond requirements and increase the overall value of the encounter (Grandey & Brauburger, 2002).

All smiles are not created equal

Impression management processes include both the strategies of the actor and the perceptions of the observer. Below, we first discuss how employees engage in strategies that create inauthentic or authentic displays.

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