Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors: Test of a social exchange model of antecedents

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Abstract

Using a sample of 281 frontline service employees of a national retail bank, we test a social exchange model of antecedents of three dimensions of customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors suggested by prior boundary-spanning and services marketing/management literatures: external representation, internal influence, and service delivery. In support of our hypotheses, we identify fully mediated relationships from procedural, interactional, and distributive justice to external representation and internal influence via job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Our results generally support our expectation that the indirect effects of procedural justice on external representation and internal influence are stronger than the indirect effects of distributive or interactional justice on these behaviors. Also, our results reveal no significant indirect effects of procedural and distributive justice on service delivery behaviors. However, we find an unexpected direct positive path from interactional justice to service delivery behaviors. We interpret this latter finding in light of the normative value of interactional justice as a source of role modeling or managerial legitimacy.

Keywords: Boundary-spanning behavior; Social exchange model; Customer-oriented; Prosocial; Citizenship

Over the past two decades, both academics and practitioners have asserted a “spillover” effect between employee attitudes such as justice perceptions, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment and customers’ satisfaction and service quality perceptions (cf. Bowen, Gilliland, & Folger 1999). Empirical research has generally provided support for these assertions across service industries (cf. Bernhardt, Donthu, & Kennett 2000; Hartline & Ferrell 1996), and firms have adopted slogans such as “People-Service-Profits” to express their confidence in these linkages. Other research reveals that prosocial behaviors of frontline service employees (FSEs), including discretionary service- or customer-oriented behaviors, help to explain the spillover effects of employee attitudes on customer outcomes (Bell & Menguc 2002; Bettencourt & Brown 1997).

Despite the need for studies to better understand how and why distinct employee attitudes are related to various FSE prosocial behaviors, at least three important concerns with prior research limit our understanding. First, despite repeated calls for consideration of prosocial behaviors tailored to the unique job demands and work context of customer service employees (cf. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach 2000), most research on boundary-spanning service employees has only investigated prosocial behaviors such as traditional organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) that are equally applicable across jobs and contexts (cf. Bell & Menguc 2002). Second, although past research provides a clear indication of the relevance of applying social exchange theory to the study of relationships among employee attitudes and prosocial behaviors (cf. MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Ahearne 1998), this research has not generally investigated the range of employee attitudes we consider. For example, studies of prosocial behavior antecedents have often not included distributive, procedural, and interactional justice perceptions simultaneously or have not included both job satisfaction and organizational commitment with justice per-
consideration of the distinct effects of three theoretical di-

licerations among dimensions of customer-oriented behaviors

may affect the strength of their relationships with customer-

oriented prosocial behaviors (Masterson 2001), and differ-

ces among dimensions of customer-oriented behaviors

may effect the strength of their relationships with antecedents

(Bettencourt & Brown 2003).

The objective of this paper is to address these impor-
tant concerns with prior research by developing a theoretical
model predicting how distinct employee attitudes are related
to distinct dimensions of customer-oriented behaviors, and
testing this model using a sample of FSEs employed in re-
tail banking. Specifically, the paper: (a) develops a social
exchange-based model of the attitudinal antecedents of three
conceptually distinct forms of customer-oriented boundary-
spanning behaviors, (b) tests the hypothesized differential
effects of three dimensions of organizational justice percep-
tions on the three forms of customer-oriented behaviors, and
(c) investigates the extent to which these relationships are
mediated by job satisfaction and organizational commitment
as social exchange theory would predict.

Theoretically, the paper contributes to past literature by
taking a multi-dimensional view of customer-oriented be-
haviors that provides deeper insight into which behaviors are
most strongly related to distinct employee attitudes. The pa-
per also offers theoretical insight into which attitude con-
structs are most strongly related to distinct dimensions of
customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, including
consideration of the distinct effects of three theoretical di-

mensions of organizational justice (cf. Colquitt, Conlon,
Wesson, Porter, & Ng 2001). Finally, the paper advances theo-
retical understanding concerning the reasons why distinct
organizational justice dimensions are related to customer-
oriented boundary-spanning behaviors by testing both direct
and mediated effects of the justice constructs on customer-
oriented behaviors.

Managerially, the results highlight the insufficiency of try-
ing to establish a customer-oriented climate on the frontline
of service organizations through reliance on more formal,
control-oriented management practices. Rather, the results
point to the necessity of developing social exchange relation-
ships with service employees as a foundation for a customer-
oriented climate. Further, the results suggest that managers
should pay special attention to issues of procedural and inter-
actional justice in seeking to develop the types of social ex-
change relationships that foster customer-oriented behaviors.
However, the identification of fully mediated effects from
procedural and distributive justice to the customer-oriented
behaviors suggests that increasing perceptions of these two
types of justice is simply one possible means of motivat-
ing these behaviors. Rather, the results suggest that any ac-
tions taken to improve either job satisfaction or organizational
commitment (such as increases in task variety) will also pro-
vide the desired foundation for a customer-oriented climate.

Following a brief consideration of the meaning of cus-
tomer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors and orga-
nizational justice, we introduce our theoretical model and
develop our hypotheses. We then present an empirical field
study with a sample of 281 customer service employees from
an entire region of a national bank designed to test our pro-
posed model and hypotheses. We conclude the paper with a
discussion of the implications of the findings.

Conceptual background

Customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors

The services marketing/management and boundary-
spanning literatures both suggest three key dimensions of
customer-linking behaviors of FSEs that contribute to the
development of market-driven capabilities and resources (cf.
Bettencourt & Brown 2003; Bettencourt, Gwinner, & Meuter
2001). First, FSEs play an important part in representing the
organization to outsiders (including customers) and enhanc-
ing the firm’s image and legitimacy through their advocacy
of the firm and its products and services (Aldrich & Herker
1977; Bowen & Schneider 1985). Second, the boundary-
spanning position of FSEs provides them many opportuni-
ties to share information internally about evolving customer
needs and possible improvements in service delivery (Aldrich &
Herker 1977; Schneider & Bowen 1984; Zeithaml, Berry,
& Parasuraman 1988). Third, service quality perceptions and
customer satisfaction are largely dependent on FSE service
delivery behaviors such as courtesy, personal attentiveness,
responsiveness, and keeping promises (Aldrich & Herker
1977; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry 1988).

Drawing from this research, we investigate three types of
behaviors the FSE may perform that are associated with
linking the organization to its potential or actual customers
(cf. Bettencourt & Brown 2003; Bettencourt et al. 2001): (1)
external representation, being vocal advocates to outsiders
of the organization’s image, goods, and services (cf. Bowen
& Schneider 1985); (2) internal influence, taking individual
initiative in communications to the firm and co-workers to
improve service delivery by the organization, co-workers, and
oneself (cf. Schneider & Bowen 1984; Zeithaml et al. 1988),
and (3) service delivery, serving customers in a conscientious,
responsive, flexible, and courteous manner (cf. Parasuraman
et al. 1988).

Included among our three dimensions are customer-
oriented boundary-spanning behaviors (COBSBs) that are
likely to be considered relatively more role-prescribed and
those that are likely to be considered relatively more extra-
role. For the majority of FSEs, service delivery behaviors are
likely to be relatively more role-prescribed due to their fre-
quent specification in job descriptions, training materials, and
performance evaluation forms whereas external representa-
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