

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.

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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-

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ceptions (cf. Netemeyer, Boles, McKee, & McMurrian 1997; Moorman, Blakely, & Niehoff 1998). Third, past research has not provided a thorough theoretical or empirical consideration of how distinct FSE attitudes may be *differentially* related to distinct customer-oriented behaviors. Yet, recent research demonstrates that differences among the justice dimensions may affect the strength of their relationships with customer-oriented prosocial behaviors (Masterson 2001), and differences among dimensions of customer-oriented behaviors may affect the strength of their relationships with antecedents (Bettencourt & Brown 2003).

The objective of this paper is to address these important 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 retail 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 perceptions 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 behaviors that provides deeper insight into which behaviors are most strongly related to distinct employee attitudes. The paper also offers theoretical insight into which attitude constructs are most strongly related to distinct dimensions of customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors, including consideration of the distinct effects of three theoretical dimensions of organizational justice (cf. Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng 2001). Finally, the paper advances theoretical 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 trying 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 relationships 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 interactional justice in seeking to develop the types of social exchange 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 motivating these behaviors. Rather, the results suggest that any actions taken to improve either job satisfaction or organizational

commitment (such as increases in task variety) will also provide the desired foundation for a customer-oriented climate.

Following a brief consideration of the meaning of customer-oriented boundary-spanning behaviors and organizational 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 proposed 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 enhancing 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 opportunities 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 extrarole. For the majority of FSEs, service delivery behaviors are likely to be relatively more role-prescribed due to their frequent specification in job descriptions, training materials, and performance evaluation forms whereas external representa-

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