



# Prime time: The strategic use of subconscious priming to enhance customer satisfaction

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## KEYWORDS

Subconscious priming;  
Customer;  
Co-production;  
Service experience

**Abstract** A growing body of work explores how priming goals in the subconscious can improve employee productivity. Likewise, practitioners and scholars are seeking strategies and techniques for improving customer effectiveness in performing the roles they play as partial employees in their service experiences. The purpose of this article is to present the rationale and logic underlying subconscious goal setting, its application for improving customers' success in their service experiences, a proposed typology of priming cues to illustrate how customers' time spent waiting can be used to enhance their ability to successfully perform their co-production roles, and strategies organizations can use to improve customers' performance in obtaining their expected service experience.

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## 1. Introduction

A customer approaches a bank's outside ATM machine, stares in confusion at the touch screen prompts, and then either walks inside to find a teller or walks away. A patient enters a clinic, haltingly answers questions with his limited language skills, and then leaves with the wrong medicine. A taxpayer goes online to file her tax returns, overlooks parts of the form requiring entries, and is later billed by the IRS for non-payment of the correct amount plus interest. With services now comprising over 80% of the North American economy, it is increasingly important for both profit and not-for-profit organizations providing these services to ensure that

customers successfully have their desired experience. Whether the service is a financial transaction, healthcare exchange, or an online experience, service encounters require customers to participate in the production of that experience in one or more ways. Successful organizations are gaining a competitive advantage by spending the time and money to ensure that their customers co-produce service experiences in ways that meet or exceed their expectations.

Researchers of organizational behavior have long studied ways to improve employee performance in work settings. Furthermore, researchers of customer behavior have long studied ways to improve customer satisfaction. As the economy continues its transformation from a manufacturing to a service dominant marketplace, these two disciplines are converging, prompting examination of ways to improve customer

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performance in co-producing their own service experiences. Thinking of the customer as an active participant or 'quasi-employee' in producing a service experience extends to him/her application of the performance-enhancing knowledge developed in organizational behavior.

Whether the customer's 'job' is to pick the correct ski slope for their skill level, select stocks with the most appropriate risk at a brokerage, insert the right information on an online order form, describe their illness accurately to a medical doctor, or check out correctly at a grocery store, the customer has to successfully perform one or more tasks in order to have a satisfying service experience. However, even if customers break their legs skiing, lose all their investments, never get their orders filled, are misdiagnosed by the doctor, or buy the wrong groceries, the organization still must ensure that the customers successfully perform their tasks in the service experience. When customer satisfaction is at least partially determined by how well a customer participates in his/her own experience, organizations co-producing those experiences can enhance customer satisfaction by applying what is known about managing employees to managing these quasi-employees. The challenge for organizations is to ensure that a customer who is capable of doing these tasks is also motivated to correctly perform them.

Organizations can motivate customers by using performance enhancement methods and techniques used to motivate their employees. Thus, customers can be incited to perform through the proffering of rewards that meet their needs, by setting goals that are meaningful, or by priming a pre-existing response. If a customer needs transportation, then a car advertisement can motivate the purchase of a specific car at a specific dealer by showing how it will satisfy that need. If a person playing a video game is motivated by beating others' scores, then a video arcade can motivate that person to exert effort by posting the high scores of previous players. If the smell of Cinnabons in an airport terminal stimulates the hunger response, then the traveler will be motivated to buy and eat one. In other words, we know a great deal about how to consciously motivate customer participation in a service experience. While research has helped organizations effectively use conscious priming strategies to enhance customer performance, we know very little about the powerful potential of subconscious priming to motivate customer performance in co-production of tasks necessary to obtain customer satisfaction.

The issue of interest to organizations entails how to strategically use subconscious primes to improve customer performance and thereby increase satisfaction with the service experience. The purpose of

this article is to present the rationale and logic underlying subconscious priming, its application to improving customers' capabilities in co-producing their service experiences, and a typology of priming cues to illustrate how customers' wait times can be strategically used to enhance their ability to successfully perform whatever tasks are necessary to obtain their expected service experience.

Co-producing the experience in a way that enhances customer satisfaction can not only be shaped by conscious primes like advertising and videos, but also by subconscious primes. Just as a ringing bell caused Pavlov's dogs to drool, seeing a red light causes drivers to stop, or smelling freshly baked chocolate chip cookies causes children to tug on a parent's hand to buy a treat, we respond to primes we have in our memories and, frequently, we are unaware of them as they are buried in our subconscious.

My argument is based on two core ideas. First, the well-accepted service dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) suggests that customers must somehow participate in their service experience in order to meet their expectations (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003). This participation is termed *co-production*. From simple co-production tasks like ordering a lawn service and then writing a check to complex tasks like actively cooperating with the brain surgeon probing inside a skull for neurological connections, nearly every service involving an interaction between the customer and an organization requires the customer to do something to obtain that service (Bettencourt, 1997; Chan, Yim, & Lam, 2010). Those customer co-production tasks require the organization to manage the customer's actions and behaviors with the same thorough thoughtfulness it uses to manage its own employees (Ford, Sturman, & Heaton, 2012). If the customer is unable or unwilling to perform whatever tasks are required to have the expected experience, then the organization providing the experience must either have a strategy for enabling that customer to successfully perform the co-production role or risk customer dissatisfaction. Staff members at a hospital emergency room hope that arriving patients will be able to tell the attending physician where it hurts, but are prepared to use diagnostic tools to identify the medical problem when the patient is unable to speak. Similarly, TurboTax offers its users options to insert their own calculations on items such as business car use deductions or default to its preprogrammed entries.

Second, since nearly every service has various waiting times between when a customer arrives and when that customer leaves (Dickson, Ford, & Laval, 2005), the extant subconscious goal setting research offers an excellent strategy for using those waiting times to enable the customer to better perform

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