Customers’ Preferred Service Behaviors in the Medical and Restaurant Industries: the Case of the Mexican Consumers

Laura Serviere, University of Texas-Pan American, USA
Anshu Saran, University of Texas-Pan American, USA
Jose N. Barragan, Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon, Mexico

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The interaction that occurs between a service provider and a customer has received a significant amount of attention in the services research stream. However, there is still little knowledge with regards to how consumers assess service encounters, and even less about what is important to consumers in different countries other than the U.S. Additional research in different cultures is needed to expand the knowledge about preferred service behaviors among consumers.

This research investigated a group of behaviors (caring, courtesy, friendliness, and promptness) to determine their relative importance in interactions with medical and restaurant service encounters and their impact on satisfaction among Mexican consumers. Mexico is worthwhile to examine because it offers a different cultural environment than the previously researched countries (U.S. and Japan). Furthermore, 39.3% of the labor force in Mexico takes place in service sectors, where the technical, professional, personal, and social services employ 3,799,157 workers (INEGI 1999).

This research had the following objectives: First, the identification of the service behaviors that had greater significance for Mexican consumers when interacting in medical and restaurant encounters. Second, the cross-industry comparison to determine whether Mexican consumers have a preference in the behaviors displayed by service providers. Third, the determination of whether these service behaviors had an impact on the satisfaction of Mexican consumers within these specific industries. The service encounter dimensions chosen for this cross-industry study were caring, courtesy, friendliness, and promptness.

The medical and restaurant industries are commonly and frequently used by consumers anywhere in the world, allowing the study of differences between them due to their highly interactive nature but still potential variance on several dimensions (Winstead 1999). The medical industry is represented by interactions of customer with their doctors, and the restaurant industry is represented by sit-down encounters. Professional service encounters, such as the medical, have unique characteristics as the service person usually has an advanced degree and typically the encounter requires a high level of interaction between the parties involved (Brown and Swartz 1989). These requirements and situations are not mandatory in the restaurant industry, where it is not necessary to have an advanced degree and where the levels of interaction can vary based on the type of restaurant (fast food vs. sit-down).

The following hypotheses were tested to determine in which industry the selected behaviors had a greater relative importance and to further establish the relative influence of the service behaviors per industry:

H1: Caring will have a greater importance for the Mexican consumers in interactions with doctors than in interactions with waiters.
H2: Courtesy will have a greater importance for the Mexican consumers in interactions with waiters than in interactions with doctors.
H3: Friendliness will have a greater importance for the Mexican consumers in interactions with waiters than in interactions with doctors.
H4: Promptness will have a greater importance for the Mexican consumers in interactions with waiters than in interactions with doctors.
H5: The service behaviors of caring, courtesy, friendliness, and promptness will have a direct relationship with satisfaction in interactions with waiters and doctors for the Mexican consumers.

The statistical analysis aimed to determine in which industry the selected behavior had a greater relative importance and to further establish the relative influence of the service behaviors per industry. A structural equation model per industry was reproduced where the proposed four service behaviors (caring, courtesy, friendliness, and promptness) led to satisfaction with the service provider. Because a model per industry was reproduced, it allowed us to determine in which industry the selected behavior had a greater relative importance, and to further establish the relative influence of the service behaviors per industry. Due to an insignificant critical ratio, the service behavior of promptness was removed in both models. The results were: H1 = supported, H2 = not supported, H3 = not supported, H4 = not supported, H5 = partially supported.

The results imply that the service behaviors of friendliness, courtesy, and caring are in fact important behaviors that the Mexican consumers prefer in both interactions, waiters and doctors, and that lead to a higher satisfaction with the service providers within these industries. The results present some implications that service providers in the medical and restaurant industry need to address when providing their services in Mexico and possibly Latin America. Friendliness is the service behavior that exerts the most influence on satisfaction with the service provider among the Mexican consumers when interacting with the restaurant and medical industries.

After friendly behaviors, the restaurant and medical settings should aim to offer a service that includes employees displaying courteous and caring attitudes. Employers in these industries can assess whether their offering includes these service behaviors that demonstrated an impact on customer satisfaction. Restaurant and medical services with friendly, courteous, and caring staff will have a positive impact in the satisfaction of these customers. Regardless of the industry, Mexican consumers, and possibly Latin American consumers as well, value friendly behaviors.

Interestingly, Mexican consumers did not show a significant need for promptness. Promptness was not a factor preferred by the consumers, nor had a significant effect on satisfaction with the service providers. This could be interpreted as showing a society that prefers the service behaviors that are oriented to the person rather than to the time factor. Service providers should focus on ensuring that their employees, especially those with a direct customer interaction, display behaviors of friendliness, courtesy, and caring, which will ultimately please the Mexican consumer. Mexican consumers should not be treated with an impersonal fast service.
Once these behaviors are included as part of the service strategy, service providers will certainly deliver a satisfactory service experience for their customers. This will lead to achieving service success where the link between the service provider and the customer will be strengthened through preferred service behaviors. Future research that addresses additional service behaviors and other industries would be appropriate and necessary to expand the knowledge about which behaviors have a greater impact in service encounters.

REFERENCES