How Frontline Personnel Handle Customer Misbehavior

Nicklas Salomonson, University of Borås

All service encounters that occur between frontline personnel and customers are not harmonious. Frontline personnel sometimes also need to handle deviant or even threatening customers. Based on interviews with personnel at Gekås Ullared a range of different types of customer misbehavior and tactics among personnel to handle these misbehaviors were found. The results also show that personnel use a number of different tactics before, during and after acts of customer misbehavior. Examples of tactics used are: (before) observing potential misbehavior in checkout lanes; (during) suggesting solutions to customers; (after) sharing experiences with colleagues.

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“How Frontline Personnel Handle Customer Misbehavior”
Nicklas Salomonson, University of Borås, Sweden
All service encounters that occur between frontline personnel and customers are not harmonious. Frontline personnel sometimes also need to handle deviant or even threatening customers (e.g., Bitner et al. 1994; Fullerton and Punj 1993; Harris and Reynolds 2004; Reynolds and Harris 2006). Lovelock (1994) who introduced the term ‘jaycustomer’ describes the phenomenon as customers who deliberately act in a thoughtless or abusive manner, causing problems for the firm, its employees, and other customers. Previous research has demonstrated different types of customer misbehaviour. For example Bitner et al. (1994) identify in a study based on interviews with hotel, restaurant, and airline personnel four different types of misbehavior among customers: drunkenness, verbal and physical abuse, breaking company policies and uncooperative customers. There are also studies of different tactics used by personnel to handle customer misbehavior (e.g., Harris and Reynolds 2004; Reynolds and Harris 2006). Reynolds and Harris (2006) that focus on the hospitality industry encourage research on contrasting service sectors. The purpose of this paper is to contribute with knowledge how frontline personnel handle customer misbehavior in the retail sector, more precisely the retail store Gekås Ullared in Sweden. The study is based on interviews with personnel that work at the check-out counter and at the return counter where customers return products which they regret buying, that does not fit or are defect in some way. The identified tactics are used by frontline personnel before, during and after incidents of customer misbehavior.

Before Incidents
Frontline personnel at the check-out counter and the return counter suggest solutions to management in order to improve service and avoid incidents of customer misbehavior. One such example was to introduce plastic bags for products that potentially can leak and destroy other products such as clothes. Another way is to keep a look out and warn other personnel for customers that previously have behaved in a negative manner. Check-out counter personnel described how they sometimes used the telephone to warn each other. The personnel also “scan” the lane of customers and try to spot potential problematic customers. Reynolds and Harris (2006) also found that personnel in a similar way judged customers entering the premises. Personnel at the return counter describe that one company policy is that they always ask customers to hand in products that the customer experience as defect. By doing so personnel do not have to test the product and discuss it in front of the customer. Often the personnel also ask the customer if he/she plans to shop in the store and if the customer can come back later to the return counter. The personnel experience that customers often have calmed down when they return.

During Incidents
When incidents of customer misbehavior are in progress frontline personnel both at the check-out counter and the return counter try to calm the customer by reasoning, suggest solutions and act calm. This is often done in combination with letting the customer talk and not interrupting him/her. Personnel in the return counter describe how they try to help customers that are angry due to fact that they cannot return products (especially electronics) without a receipt of the purchase. One way is to try and find receipts in company’s computer system. A related way is to be not too firm on principles but instead try to oblige the customer even if he/she is wrong. It is also important to appear competent and not hesitate since it in these situations can make the customer’s behavior worse. Another way is to let someone else in the organization handle the situation. If the situation escalates and personnel feel that they cannot handle it they have the option to call on security. Personnel at the check-out counter also describe that when discovering ongoing incidents with misbehaving customers in other counters they sometimes use the telephone to call the counter and give their support and ask if they should call security.

After Incidents
After a specific incident several of the personnel at the check-out counter and the return counter emphasize the importance of talking to colleagues about it. In that way they also share experiences. They also mention that it is important not to take it personally. Some also try to forget it as soon as possible. This seems to be related to work experience. The more experienced personnel find it easier. Sometimes personnel also give vent to their feelings by temporary isolating themselves from customers and other employees, for example by visiting an empty room. Talking to colleagues and temporarily isolation were something that Reynolds and Harris (2006) also found in their study. An additional way to handle situations with customer misbehavior is that personnel try to relate to the customer’s situation and in that way somewhat excuse the behavior.

Conclusion and Future Research
The study has identified a number of tactics used by frontline personnel to handle acts of customer misbehavior. Knowledge about these tactics can be used by management in education for personnel in order to further improve the customer service and the way these incidents can be handled. Future research should investigate other retail stores in order to further expand the knowledge about customer misbehavior and tactics used among frontline personnel.

REFERENCES


