Service Work and Employee Experience of the Service Encounter
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A SERVICE SOCIETY

The notion that today we live in a distinct service society is wide-spread (Rosen 1998; Chung & Schneider 2002), although some scholars, like Sayer and Walker (1992) and Svensson and Orban (1995), are critical of such a one-sided description. The former researchers claim that manufacturing in general and goods in particular still play a major role in our temporary society; houses, cars, computers, telephones and so forth are necessary for running almost any kind of service operation. Sayer and Walker (1992:56) are also critical towards the demarcation of goods and services claiming that ‘for those who want to see them, services are everywhere.’ Conversely, Echeverri and Edvarsson (2002) among others, claim that it is not important whether an organisation produces or sells goods, provides services, or offers a combination of goods and services – the importance is in adapting a service perspective to think of the organisation as a service provider. Traditional manufactures of products view themselves increasingly as service producers; ‘one does not manufacture a car but offer transportation, one does not sell washing machines but an opportunity of clean clothes’ (Echeverri & Edvardsson 2002:18) etc.

Regardless of how we may look upon our modern society, it is obvious that an increasing proportion of employees work with services (Rosen 1998) in comparison to manufacturing; 80 percent of the workforce in Sweden, for example, can be found within the service industry and nine out of ten new jobs are within the service economy (Echiverri & Edvardsson 2002). This pattern is similar for most western societies.

THE ESSENCE OF SERVICE

If our modern society claims to be a service society, it may important to scrutinize the criteria that make it one. Traditionally, a society is divided into agriculture, manufacturing, and service although some researchers are critical of how such division occurs.

A service society must be something else than just an industrial society (or an agricultural one) based on products and goods. The early efforts to distinguish services from goods proposed that a service is the opposite of a product (Lindquist & Persson 1997). Once creative definition states that services are abstract (can not be stored, moved, or demonstrated), the customer
usually takes part in the making, and that production and consumption coincide. This definition is not bulletproof and the search for a more durable definition of service has, despite persistent efforts over the years, somewhat failed. Scholars seem to have lost interest (perhaps due to a seemingly endless struggle) in finding out what service is by definition; it seems, nevertheless, like there is a (silent) general agreement that we can rule out any possibility of a society built on manufacturing. If we accept that we live in a service society and do not dwell on how to define service, the service industry seems imprecise and slightly confusing. Echeverri and Edvardsson (2002:38, writers' translation) make the following conclusion about services:

The service industry includes a wide range of organizations that offer widely different services. It can revolve around simple services like running and maintaining a swimming facility or complex services as health care and services provided by law firms. It can revolve around standardized services, e.g. telecommunication services, or customized services directed for instance towards handicapped people. Companies may aim their service towards individual consumers, or towards other companies and organizations. Services can be knowledge-intensive, e.g. higher education, or knowledge-intensive, e.g. cleaning. Services may be individual related and personnel-intensive with focus on the interaction with service employees, which is the case in elderly care and theatre, or it may be technology related with focus on equipment, which is the case when it comes to banking via cash dispenser or telephone. Service can be linked to physical products, e.g. insurances and guarantees can be connected to a car, but products can also be linked to services as for instance when a passenger receive newspapers and food during a train journey. Services can be continuous, i.e. used often, maybe even on a daily basis. Such services do not bring about a choice between different alternatives, for instance public transportation or telecom. But services may also be discrete, i.e. of a kind that brings about a choice between providers from time to time, e.g., restaurants or hotels. Services may be directed towards the domestic market or offered abroad. Services can be provided by private companies or produced within the public sector. Services can be divided from the degree of customer contact or customer involvement.

It is difficult to discuss services as a homogeneous category since services themselves may differ dramatically in a number of ways. According to Elfring (1989), services can be divided into four categories: a) producer services (mainly knowledge and information to support manufacturing processes in the industrial sector); b) distributive services (transportation and communication); c) personal services (primarily consumption-based services, for example, retail, hotel and restaurants, repair and so forth); and d) social services (foremost public services like health care and education). It is important to notice that there are great differences within each category, for example, the emphasis on tangibles versus intangibles (the goods versus service discussion revisited?). Some services rely heavily on products, technological solutions, facilities and so forth while others focus on the person providing the service. It is, however, difficult to assert objectively specific services from such a division. Competence, personal skills, and working conditions within the service sector differ as well.
On the one hand, we have unskilled service workers with low status and low income – sometimes labelled the service proletariat – while on the other hand, we have professionals with occupations that involve high status and high wages. No one would object that cleaners and lawyers, for example, work under different conditions, but there might also be significant differences within the same service classification. Hall (1994:74) concludes, for instance, that ‘the server in an exclusive restaurant has a very different job and a very different status than that of the food-service worker in a local pizzeria or the counter person at a fast-food franchise.’ What many employees in the service industry do have in common is that a significant part of the job involves interaction with others (Guiry 1992) in the shape of customers, clients, patients, students and so forth. A common feature in most services is the occurrence of people, that is, customers and employees meeting each other. The lowest common denominator, or the essence of service, is based on someone (employee) giving service and someone else (customer) receiving service, although there are some services where the employee part is replaced by technology in some shape.

Due to the very nature of service work, a vast majority of research has focused on interpersonal aspects (Curran et al. 2003). Ever since Normann (1984) used the phrase moment of truth to describe the importance of employee behaviour and employee performance, ‘service quality research has focused almost exclusively on the employee’s part in the service setting’ (Guiry 1992:666). One of our respondents, who works as a shop assistant says, ‘you must find it fun to meet people because that’s what this job is all about.’ In terms of service quality, Fisk et al. (1993) identified service quality to be the single most researched area in service marketing from 1986 to 1993. Although today service quality as a concept is regarded as a bit out of fashion, Sollberger and Furrer (2004) conclude – after a review of the marketing literature since 1993 – that service quality still is the most prominent research topic. Many of the proposed quality aspects are closely linked to the performance of the employee (Brady and Cronin 2001), or in other words, what happens in the service encounter. Usually, the employee who provides the actual service is viewed as a part of that service (Grove & Fisk 1992) and ‘many times that interaction is the service from the customer’s point of view’ (Bitner et al. 1990:71). Leidner (1996:30) summarizes this notion by suggesting that ‘there are no clear boundaries between the worker, the work process, and the product in interactive service work.’
THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

There are mainly two perspectives within the field of service research. First, there is the profitability perspective (e.g. service management and customer relationship marketing) that starts with the customer’s point of view on the service experience. This research is generally pro management and by finding out what customers appreciate and value in their interaction with service providers enables management to organise their business operation according to customers’ wishes, needs, and demands. The purpose of this research is to find out how to run a successful business and increase profit. Findings from such studies, however, make implicit statements regarding working conditions among service employees. Second, there is the working condition perspective that begins with employees’ experiences of service work in general and interaction with customers in particular. This research is usually pro employee and rather critical towards working conditions in the service industry. This line of research makes explicit statements about working conditions in the service sector.

Although case studies usually are conducted regardless of perspective, scholars have a tendency to imply that the result from a specific study is valid for customers, employees, or organisations in general. This may or may not be true. Our purpose is to combine and summarize research from both these perspectives and compare them to a random sample of Swedish employees with regular customer contacts, along with additional interviews with employees within the service sector.

METHOD

The empirical data in this study was derived from questionnaires and qualitative interviews. A questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 2,000 people from the Swedish population aged 18 to 64 years, provided by Statistics Sweden, was used. To sort out employees with daily customer contacts in their work, those outside the labour market, unemployed and those with no customer/client contact were asked to return the questionnaire, without filling it out. After two written reminders, the response rate was 1,018 questionnaires. Of these, 525 persons stated they have daily contact with customers, clients, pupils etc. They were distributed as follows: 59 percent women and 41 percent men. The age span was 22 to 64 years, 50 percent work in private and public sector respectively. Education-wise breakdown of respondents with respect to the
highest completed education: 12 percent have elementary education, 54 percent have secondary education, while 34 percent have college or university education. The selection is not based on occupation or industry and hence the material is presented at an aggregated level. The common denominator of the respondents is that their work is characterized by daily contact with customers. The questionnaire used consists of both direct questions as statements. As for allegations the respondent has been asked to mark on a five-point scale, from totally agree to totally disagree, how well the consistent with the personal opinion or experience. The majority of response options to the questions also consists of scales.

In addition to this, in depths interviews with 21 employees were conducted; ten men and eleven women between the ages of 23 and 55. The interviewees are working as shop assistants, real estate agents, receptionists, waiters/waitresses/bartenders, tour reps, ski instructors, real estate agents, and travel agents. The interviews were aimed at emotions within the service interaction from an employee perspective.

The results are presented in various tables, along with quotations from the interviews.

THE STRUCTURE OF SERVICE WORK

Social structure (e.g. the service sector) is certain positions (e.g. service provider and service receiver) and their internal relationship. The relationship in service interaction is based on employees giving service and customers receiving service (Guiry 1992) within an organisational context. The very nature of services is to serve others (Hall 1994), which is the essence of the social structure of services. Without this essence, the phenomenon disappears.

In services, there are primarily three actors: management, employees, and customers (figure 1) all with different interests (Leidner 1996). Echeverri and Edvardsson (2002:26) conclude that ‘it is important to point out that owner interest is superior to customer interest which is superior to employee interest’. Such a statement reveals awareness of a conflict of interest that most pro management researchers in the field choose to ignore or simply deny. Without fully penetrating the interests of these three actors, one could argue that profitability is one major interest or goal and not just for management.
Figure 1: The service interaction triangle and its primary actors.

The reason for running a service business is primarily economic in many cases, although economic reasons sometimes need to be concealed or disguised as concern for individuals (i.e. customers). Corvellec (2005) insinuates that (service) management is a wolf in sheep’s clothing with a main interest in maximum profit. Thus, control of the service process becomes a fundamental issue. Of course, economic interests – in the shape of income – would apply to employees as well. Hodson (1991) concludes that an overriding interest of employees is autonomy – in a broad sense. As for the relationship between management and employees in general, Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) claim that there is a struggle for control over four areas: work tasks, time, products, and identity. Theoretically, there is a conflict of interests between management and employees revolving around the amount of work, the work itself, identification, commitment, and loyalty. Often in the management literature on service, however, employees are portrayed as being most interested in the well-being of customers; to provide and deliver excellent service is what motivates employees. Conversely, Chebat et al. (2002), highlight the importance of (fair) pay when it comes to employees’ willingness to provide high-quality service and they suggest that pay has a greater effect on motivation than behavioural control and training. As for the interests of customers, there is no clear-cut description. Customers’ interest may be – as management’s – essentially economic (Smith & Hantula 2003), but it is more often proposed that customers want service quality (Parasuraman et al. 1988) and stimulation of the senses (Mossberg 2003), often within the context of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore 1999).

Although management, employees, and customers have their own interests, they are not always directly opposed to each other. Interactive service work
represents a ‘complex dynamic in which each of three groups of participants has interests that bring them sometimes into alliance, sometimes into opposition with each of the two’ (Leidner 1996:39). Conversely, Zeithaml et al., (1990:2) do not acknowledge any conflict of interest between the actors, claiming that ‘with service excellence everyone wins. Customers win. Employees win. Stockholders win. Communities win. The country wins’. Zeithaml et al.’s (1990) statement is a perfect illustration of a notion, or even an illusion, that management, employees, and customers have the same goal and share the same interest…excellent service!

‘A service encounter is an encounter between personnel and customer’ (Mossberg 2003:83) and the relationship in service interaction is based on employees giving service and customers receiving service (Guiry 1992). Nonetheless, management and its managerial philosophies is an influential actor when it comes to shaping, organizing, and controlling service work, service employees, and even customers’ expectations, needs, wishes, and demands. Morris and Feldman (1996:986-987) state that ‘the images employees create for customers and the quality of interactions between employees and customers have become increasingly under the control of management.’ In addition, our data shows that 62 percent of service employees have received internal training in various degrees where proper employee behaviour was included and 51 percent have received managerial instructions regarding the use of proper phrases and words when interacting with customers. Management is usually an ‘invisible’ actor in the service interaction, lurking in the shadows and seemingly letting employees and customers single-handedly sort out service transactions. The visible or apparent part of service is consequently the interaction between employee and customer, in which the employee is expected to show sympathy and take personal interest in the customer. Within the service context, there is often an illusion of personal care and consideration embedded – ‘impersonal relations are to be seen as if they were personal. Relations based on getting and giving money are to be seen as if they were relations free of money’ (Hochschild 1983:106). The service provider is often required – by company policy – to meet and even exceed the needs and wishes of the customer at the same time the provider experiences sales demands. This is depicted in an introduction manual of a chain store in which one can read:

The customer would be really irritated at herself and in the end at the company if she, when arriving home missed necessary accessories [...] Do never take for granted the customer knows what he or she wants (Abiala 2000:76, writers’ translation).
In plain language, it is all about making the customer, and often the employee, believe that personal consideration (for the customer) is the main driver behind certain behaviour, manner, and conduct in the customer–employee interaction. If personal sales provision and sales bonus is applied, the employee has a personal interest in selling. What might look like consideration for the customer may instead, or at least in equal part, be the economic self-interest of the employee.

I get additional provision based on what I sell – excursions, rental car, and insurance. Right after selling a trip to Cyprus I say ‘you should rent a car and go on the south side, down Pafos and Lindos [...] then you go to Aphrodite’s rock and there's this legend saying that if you swim seven times around the rock you’ll be forever young.’ They say ‘yeah right, we have to swim around that rock!’ I continue by saying ‘on your back home you go up in the mountains and it’s amazingly beautiful.’ In their mind, they have now seen themselves doing this trip and might say ‘a rental car would be nice’ and I say ‘great, here we have a convertible. It will be great with the sun shining and the wind in your hair.’ [Travel agent]

Corvellec’s (2005) critical analysis of service management suggests that underneath the surface of explicit personal care and consideration for the customer is management’s impersonal, calculated and perhaps even cold stance towards the customer; the customer has to be designed and then controlled. Corvellec (2005:127) argues that the organisational contact with customers is viewed as ‘a technical issue regarding organisational design and control tackled in an analytical way from a managerial perspective’ and there is no sincere consideration for people made of flesh and blood.

**ROUTINIZATION VS PERSONALIZATION: TO CONTROL THE SERVICE INTERACTION**

The whole issue of running a business and providing service is ultimately a managerial concern. Presumably, we can agree that management strives towards developing and maintaining a successful and profitable operation but humans are heterogenic and unpredictable. So what is management supposed to do?

Service encounters can be managed in two different ways, either by routinization and standardization, or by empowerment and personalization (Bowen & Schneider 1992; Leidner 1993). By choosing the former, management decides what constitutes service quality while preserving control over the service encounter. A familiar way to routinize the service encounter is to have employees use standardized scripts, which in fact are prepared phrases or words. The degree of routinization may vary from low to high, and sometimes it is just the greeting that is regulated by scripts:

You say ‘Welcome. Would you like to eat or do you just want something to drink?’ That is the first phrase we use at the restaurant. [Waitress]
Leidner (1996) suggests that it might be ill-suited to routinize service work (by standardized scripts) since it contradicts the notion that customer satisfaction is obtained by customisation and the dynamic nature in human interaction (see Bettencourt & Gwinner 1996).

Routinization has some documented disadvantages: (a) the customer may not appreciate being greeted and treated in the way management has decided; (b) the customer may feel that a particular standardization and routinization contains dishonesty through a display of untrue feelings or disliked actions of the employee; and (c) standardization and routinization may prevent the employee from meeting the expectations of the customer. The outcome of standardization and routinization in the service encounter may be counterproductive in the form of poor customer satisfaction, which in turn may lead to customers switching service provider (Abiala & Ahre 1995). Despite the criticism, much service work is in fact routinized as management demands that employees follow scripts – containing proper phrases while smiling and keeping eye contact – during the interaction (Leidner 1996; Schweingruber & Berns 2005).

Because customers show a discrepancy in terms of their preferences in the service encounter (Fuller & Smith 1996; Farell et al. 2001), empowerment and personalization is sometimes chosen. Abiala and Ahre (1995:210, *writers’ translation*) claim that ‘in order to perform at his or her best, the employee who provide the actual service has to be given authority to make personal decisions but in order to control and plan the operation management need to supervise the employee.’ The strategy of empowerment decreases desired managerial control since figuratively employees are given freedom to decide how to sort out the service encounter. Although empowerment and personalization may be chosen, management still wants control over the service deliverance; Wallace and de Chernatony (2008:158) show how managers might tackle this issue:

As duty managers, you would be going around to all the areas of the shop and you certainly would stand back and observe. [Store HR Manager]

On my day off I come in and sometimes when you are just shopping on a busy afternoon people mightn’t realise that it’s [me] … it is just to see how you are treated on those days. [Store HR manager]

Another strategy for gaining or retaining some control over the service process, while at the same time employees experience an illusion of autonomy, is to chose ‘management by customers’, which is based on customer feedback (Fuller & Smith 1996). Berry and Parasuraman (1997:66) conclude the following:

A firm whose strategy emphasizes service reliability surely would want to capture and analyze customer service complaints to identify where the service system is breaking down. A company whose strategy depends on point-of-sale service experience should
To secure desired employee behaviour, management may focus on manipulating or engineering organisational culture. Organisational culture may be referred to as an organisation’s inner life, including the way its members live, think, and behave. Ideologies, beliefs, norms, attitudes, and values are important ingredients of organisational culture. Some writers, such as Peters and Waterman (1982), claim that culture is the key to success, and Brady and Cronin (2001:241) declare ‘it is widely acknowledged that successful organisations need to have a customer-oriented business culture.’ It is believed to be far more efficient to run a business by culture (i.e. where its members/employees have internalized the values and visions of management) than by rules, regulations, and control. Berry (1999:43) establishes that ‘value-
driven leaders […] devote considerable time and effort to personally communicate the company’s values in the workplace.’ Management expects employees to embrace desired values and behaviours and make them their own. An example of this might be a tour representative in our study who says ‘the customer is always right.’ Some believe it is possible for management to influence organisational culture in a desirable direction; a manager in Wallace and de Chernatony’s (2008:159) study says, ‘I have seen people change from being annoying […] to becoming top performer.’

A mutual understanding within the customer profitability perspective is the importance of a service culture in which the employee is genuinely service minded and eager to meet the customer's expectations (Gowan et al. 2001). Schneider and Bowen (1998), for example, emphasise the importance of developing a service culture in which the employees perceive taking care of the customer’s wishes, needs, and demands as their main task. Berry (1999:45) claims that managers have an important role when it comes to influencing employees – ‘they [managers] must be the ones to coach, teach and inspire, hour after hour, day after day, week after week.’ Zeithaml et al. (1990:5) summarize this idea:

> People in service work need a vision in which they can believe, an achievement culture that challenges them to be the best they can be, a sense of team nurtures that supports them, and role models that show them the way.

Although the service provider is doing his or her best to satisfy customer needs and wishes, it is no guarantee of a successful outcome. A travel agent in our study says that sometimes her recommendation, based on her personal experience, turns out to be a disappointment to the customer – ‘How can it be? It was the best place I’ve been to. It comes as a real surprise when I know a place that is great and they [customers] think it’s barely okay.’ Southwest Airlines has shown employees videotapes of passengers complaining about service in order to influence organisational culture and help employees understand service. The executive vice president for customers, Colleen Barrett, says:

> When we show the tape, you can hear a pin drop. It’s fascinating to see the faces of employees while they’re watching. When they realize the customer is talking about them, it’s pretty chilling. That has far more impact than anything I can say. (Berry & Parasuraman 1997:73)

Wallace and de Chernatony (2008:158) claim ‘where the culture is customer focused, colleagues do not tolerate deviant behaviour.’ This is in line with
Richardson and Stanton (1973), who find that colleagues put pressure on each other’s behaviour in order to produce conformity in the work group. In Townsend’s (2004:51) study, one employee gives an example of how colleagues treated a co-worker who did not adhere to the norms:

We did have one girl who’d just park her arse on the counter and we really hated people sitting on the counter, but she’d just sit there and you’d say ‘how ’bout you do such ’n’ such’ and she’d be like, just not interested. She just wanted to sit around and do nothing and that pissed other people off. She wasn’t made to feel very welcome, nobody would talk to her and we’d give her shitty jobs…so she didn’t hang around that long.

A condition for a desirable organisational culture is probably dependent on employees liking their job although that alone would not be enough. Our data show that a vast majority of employees feel occupational pride and that there is no significant difference between men and women (table 1).

Table 1: Occupational pride and gender. Chi-Square: 0.753

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<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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<td>Great occupational pride</td>
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<td>Rather high occupational pride</td>
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<td>Rather low occupational pride</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>No occupational pride</td>
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In a service culture, it is important that the employee can ‘read’ the customer, that is, adjusting their behaviour, attitude, belief, communication style and so forth in accordance with a specific customer’s preferences (Bettencourt & Gwinner 1996). Our study clearly shows how service employees develop skills for treating different customers:

[Some customers show by] posture and expression that they prefer to be left alone, like ‘I just want to look around so keep aloof’ or it may be ‘Oh my God, where am I? Help me!’…and everything in between. [Shop assistant]

I can obviously tell if I can joke with a guest […] You scan the guest; if he wants to talk, you continue to talk, if he doesn’t want to talk and just says ‘yes’ or ‘no’ then there’s no point. You just make sure that he’s getting the best service without having a conversation, see that he gets his food, ask if he likes it, and then he probably asks for the bill and when you hand it over you say ‘thank you and have a pleasant day.’ [Waitress]
Employees who are likable, friendly, enthusiastic, and show that serving customers is more than ‘just a job’, will lead to a positive service experience for the customer (Mittal & Lassar 1996). This is supported partly by our qualitative study in which one respondent claims the following:

Regardless of the situation, they [customers] want professional treatment. It doesn’t mean you have to be formal but maybe cheerfully professional. [You should] know what you’re talking about, be able to recognise the customer’s needs and listen – not just barge ahead! Then you have to be nice, of course.

Adapting to the customer is based on visual impressions such as dress and body language, as well as initial communication. Customer response to employees’ opening phrases is discussed in the following service interaction.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CUSTOMER FOCUS

‘The customer is always right’¹ is a well-known phrase but it has not lost its appeal among many service researchers with a managerial perspective. The phrase originates from a belief that it is important to keep the customer satisfied; otherwise, reduced profitability, downsizing, shutdowns or bankruptcy is predictable. The same point of view underlies the concept of customer focus, which essentially is about giving the customer what the customer wants - but what do customers want?

Customer focus may theoretically be about (a) price; (b) employees’ knowledge, competence, and skills; (c) technical systems and technical solutions; and (d) personal contact with employees (Ivarsson 2005). Ivarsson’s (2005) study on customer focus in health care and banking shows that personal contact with employees is ranked higher than employee knowledge (level of education), technical solutions and technical devices on a general level. When it comes to specific errands and defined situations of a simple nature, both patients and bank customers prefer technical solutions and/or quick service over personal contact, including employees taking personal interest in the customer/patient and offering sympathy and empathy. More serious and comprehensive health issues are preferably handled with competence, skill, and

¹ The phrase ‘The customer is always right’ was coined originally by Harry Gordon Selfridge, the founder of Selfridge’s department store in London in 1909.
technical devices, which may be interpreted as a rational choice by the patient. Conversely, economic issues of a more comprehensive nature, or of far reaching consequences, are preferably handled through personal contact with employees who take an interest in the customer.

Although there are some findings where customers prefer factors other than an intimate or close personal contact with service providers, the aspect and importance of personal contact is highlighted repeatedly in the management literature on services. Noble and Phillips (2004:290) claim that ‘close bonds between service providers and customers are important in service industries given the intangible nature of services and the need for trust on the part of the customer’. In Carrell’s (2001:80) study on technology in banking, one customer says, ‘I want to interact with someone in person. I don’t want to talk to a machine. I want the staff to know me and I want to know them’. In services with high levels of customer–employee contact, social regard – defined as ‘the genuine respect, deference, and interest shown to the customer by the service provider such that the customer feels valued or important in the social interaction’ – has a major influence on customers’ service satisfaction (Butcher et al. 2003:187). This is supported by Berry and Parasuraman (1997:72) who depict how ‘Lexus [luxury car] drivers eagerly volunteered stories about the special care and attention they had received from their Lexus dealer. […] the extra care shown in the sales and service process strongly influenced buyer satisfaction.’

Customers may say ‘I didn’t expect you to stand by us this much. We have acquaintances who signed with [X-houses] and we never saw the salesman after the contract was signed. I’m out at the construction site a lot. I give my customers good support and that builds confidence. [House salesman]

My guests have paid a lot of money for their vacation so it’s very important everything turns out to their satisfaction. [Tour rep]

Customers’ personal contact with employees can be of three different types or characters: (a) authoritative, (b) emotional, and (c) serving. The reasons why customers seek personal contact with personnel may vary depending on what the customer is after. If the customer is in need of information, knowledge, skills, or powers, the personal contact has an authoritative character. If the customer is in need of social support, empathy, comfort, encouragement and so forth, the personal contact has an emotional character. If the customer is interested primarily in being served and waited on in a subservient and obedient way, the personal contact has a serving character (Ivarsson 2005). It may be possible,
however, to detect a combination of serving characters in a specific service encounter or in a specific service relationship. From a managerial perspective, the service literature does not address the issue of different characteristics of personal contact adequately, but there is likely a tendency towards the serving character.

Since many suppliers’ products and services within the same line of business have become similar or even identical, the customer usually has a number of potential companies from which to choose (Karlöf 1985; Vargo & Lusch 2004). Any given firm, therefore, needs something extra to stand out from the rest such as service excellence. The notion that business success is derived from the performance of service rather than superior product quality or low price is put forth by Zeithaml et al. (1990:10) as they claim the following:

It is the performance of the service that separates one service firm from others; it is the performance of the service that creates true customers who buy more, are more loyal […] and who spread favourable word of mouth. […] A genuinely warm greeting from a service provider or the graceful handling of a special request can help one firm seem very different to its customers than other suppliers of similar services.

Employees seem to share this notion of service excellence. A shop assistant in our study says, ‘Service is sometimes about endurance; a long time may pass before another customer enters [the store] but you have to be prepared and ready, at all times, to give it all you’ve got.’ Interpersonal aspects seem to be crucial for developing and sustaining customer focus in which concepts such as service excellence and service quality are embedded. Folgero and Fjeldstad (1995:309) conclude that ‘maintaining the customer–company relationship is at least as important as providing for the customer’s more tangible needs.’ Any reasonably conscientious review of service management literature reveals a strong belief in human interaction as the primary source for generating service quality but also reveals that the potential service quality is dependent on how well the employee manages to meet customers’ preferences, expectations, wishes, needs, and demands.

Human interplay (Guiry 1992) and conversations (Åberg 2007) are main ingredients in service interaction, and customers’ service preferences differ (Fuller & Smith 1996). Service quality is crucial (Mattila et al. 2003) and although there are different definitions of quality (Lindquist & Persson 1997), the customer’s perception of service quality is what matters (Zeithaml et al. 1990). Together with the adaptability aspect suggested by researchers with a managerial perspective (e.g. Bettencourt & Gwinner 1996; Sparks et al. 1997; Zeithaml 2000), the conclusion is reached that service providers need to be able
to take part in practically any kind of conversation initiated by the customer – ‘You meet a lot of people, you become a chameleon. You’re supposed to be a doctor, shrink, funny guy. You must be able to talk to anyone.’ [Tour rep].

Figure 2 illustrates how a service conversation between provider and customer can take on four analytically different characters depending on (a) the emphasis on the case, and (b) the degree of intimacy. Emphasis on the case is connected to the very reason for the service interaction, for example, seeing a physician about a birthmark (which is the example in figure 2), taking the car to a garage, or eating at a restaurant – ‘service encounters do not occur spontaneous without purpose’ (Åberg 2007:19). The degree of intimacy refers to whether the conversation is about the personal or private concerns of the customer, that is, if the focus is on the customer or if the conversation is of a non-personal character. This leaves us with four ideal types of conversations.

![Figure 2: Analytical division of conversation in service interaction with examples of content (Source: Ivarsson 2005).](image)

Depending on the service context, it is of varied importance whether the service provider is able to meet the requirements in each dimension. When a patient and a physician interact (exemplified in figure 2), the personal–focal dimension is probably most important for the patient/customer. Inability to assess whether a patient’s birthmark is a serious health risk can never be compensated by merits in other dimensions. This does not mean, however, that it is unimportant whether the physician is able to meet the requirements in other dimensions; to keep a relaxed conversation about yesterday’s soccer game (non-personal–non-focal dimension) may bring positive effects regarding the patient’s experience of the interaction, that is, service quality. Additionally, it is far from obvious that the personal–focal dimension is superior when it comes to customer satisfaction since customers’ preferences differ. It is important to...
note that figure 2 is analytical and conversation in the same encounter may in reality cover more than one dimension. The following quotations clearly illustrate that conversations between customers and service providers encompass discussions of things besides or beyond the actual service transaction, although they might be related:

[Conversation] can be family related, like ‘our son was in Tenerife last week’ [or] ‘now that it’s spring we’re going to rebuild the terrace.’ We may sit there talking and they finally say ‘whoops, now we’ve been here chatting for half an hour, maybe we should go now; bye! It [conversation] may be about anything and everything but most of the time it is travel related. [Travel agent]

[Customers] may talk about really private things; you become some kind of psychologist. It can be the relationship with the wife, colleagues, problem with the kids. It can be anything. To me it’s nothing unusual. I have friends I talk to about family and relationships; it’s natural, nothing strange. [House salesman]

Some [customers] really open up when I’m standing there selling fish. Sometimes their stories are really interesting and you find out a lot, not just private stuff. [...] Then someone who’s just pitiful comes along; nagging, nagging, and nagging. I don’t want to hear another word from this person and I would like to say ‘excuse me, the telephone’s ringing. I have to answer. Have a nice day.’ But I can’t bloody do it. I just stand there watching the clock and trying not to show how bored I am. [Shop assistant]

The winos told me a lot of what they had gone through. They didn’t feel that good and they wanted someone to listen. [Waitress]

I have a customer who tells me every week that he has cancer; I’ve heard it 13 times. Every week he shows his hand and says ‘see how my nails look’. Sometimes I wonder ‘is he senile or is it something he must say to feel better?’ Certainly he’s been through hell having cancer but he seems to be recovering. As I said, he shows his nails every f**king time and I think it’s bloody disgusting. [Shop assistant]

One may ask why service providers give customers room to discuss things not connected to the actual errand and why they participate in such conversations. Perhaps it has a smoothing effect (lubrication of the social order, keeping the service motor running) or it may be viewed as proper social conduct in general. In some cases, the reason might be connected to humanity and the employee gets to be a Good Samaritan by showing empathy. It might also be about calculation; talking with customers about whatever they want may bring along a ‘familiar atmosphere’, which may result in more sales. Conversation about topics besides the official ‘purpose’ may also be enriching for the provider and arise because of mutual respect or mutual interests. The latter would be an example of what Gremler and Gwinner (2000) label ‘personal connection’, which together with ‘enjoyable interaction’ creates rapport.
With some people, you have things in common and obviously you get a feeling of belonging. It’s the same way in every context and social environment. With some people you thrive, it’s that simple and there’s nothing strange about it. […] I certainly connect with some customers. [Shop assistant]

You have more in common with some customers, which enables you to get closer to them. I think it’s only nice. Someone may enter [the store] wearing a golf cap and I may ask ‘what’s your handicap [in golf]?’ [Shop assistant]

Berry and Parasuraman (1997) suggest that organisations need to gather data from customers regarding service quality, and front-line employees should receive information about the expectations and perceptions of the customers they serve. Among those customers who switch service providers, 70 percent do so because of poor customer support (Söderlund 1997). In addition, Keaveney (1995:76) talks about service encounter failures related to employees being uncaring, impolite, unresponsive, or unknowledgeable and she provides some customer comments as illustrations:

The doctor was very cut and dry [sic], and I did not feel she listened to me. She didn’t validate my concerns and discuss them further with me.

The waitress was practically nonexistent. She never asked if everything was ok or if we needed anything else.

The barber spent [more] time talking to her boyfriend than paying attention to what she was doing with her scissors.

The accountant only talked to us for 20 minutes.

The [flight] attendant had as much personality as an ATM machine.

The plumber seemed to have a lack of caring about us.

The respondents in our qualitative study do not agree with these statements. If some customers view the employees in a negative way, some respondents said it was not their intention to behave in an unfriendly way or to alienate the customer.

I believe one should ‘be on the ball’, but of course you may be distant some times. If I’m alert, the customer probably gets a good feeling about me as an estate agent. It’s important to be committed and responsive to what customers want. [Real estate agent]

[A perception that staff is boring] may derive from employees not opening up, not being approachable. That’s important for being a ski instructor, skiing should be fun. If you’re tired or having a bad day you may be seen as boring and a lot of people are unable to glue on a smile if they are tired. [Ski instructor]
I think the boring side comes creeping when you have been working ten hours straight and people are not aware of the long hours. They might ask why I’m not smiling and then I just smile a little. If I’m not talking that much they may think I’m boring.

[Bartender]

Customers have high demands on employees and their behaviour in a broad sense. It is obvious that (some) customers demand to be the centre of attention or in focus. It is also interesting to notice how employees seem to share this notion of putting the customer first. Personal attention (through theoretical concepts like customisation and personalization) is crucial in services, according to McColl-Kennedy and White (1997:255), and they report that the (hotel) customer wants to be ‘treated like an individual and not just another guest.’ When it comes to perceived customer expectations, one waitress in our study says,

Well, to receive the best possible service... That’s what I too expect when I’m out. When given the service you deserve as a guest you’re thankful and nice to the staff. [...] If you’ve had a good time at the restaurant together with the waitress you spread the word [...]. That gives the restaurant more guests.

Statements like these reveal that some service providers are explicitly aware of the fact that they are customers too (although at other times) and therefore they treat their customers the way they want to be treated themselves. It is also apparent that service providers may have a strong belief in the importance of providing good service and consequently they implicitly or explicitly share management’s general visions and goals. A tour rep says, ‘you adjust to different situations [...] you sure try to create some kind of a friendly atmosphere’, and a shop assistant says, ‘the customers are most important; without customers I wouldn’t have my job and this store would probably not exist. You have to consider that sometimes.’

Yi and Gong (2008) discuss, from a customer satisfaction point of view, the potential relationship between employee behaviour (employee citizenship behaviour and employee dysfunctional behaviour) and customer behaviour (customer citizenship behaviour and customer dysfunctional behaviour) illustrated in table 2. Employee citizenship behaviour is simply about employee behaviour that ‘promotes the effective functioning of the organization’ (Organ 1988:4) while employee dysfunctional behaviour is the opposite – behaviour that harms the organisation (Spector et al. 2006). Customer citizenship behaviour is defined as ‘voluntary and discretionary behaviours that are not required for the successful production and/or delivery of the service but that, in the aggregate, help the service
organization overall’ (Groth 2005:11). Customer dysfunctional behaviour is more or less the opposite – careless or offensive behaviour causing problems for the organisation, its employees and/or other customers (Lovelock 2001). Yi and Gong (2008) come to the (highly expected) conclusion that employee citizenship behaviour increases customer satisfaction while employee dysfunctional behaviour decreases customer satisfaction. Such a conclusion may be just as obvious as Swinyard’s (2003) statement that employees in a good mood give better service than do employees in a bad mood. Unfortunately, neither Yi and Gong (2008) or Swinyard (2003) discuss how customer behaviour and customer mood respectively may affect employee behaviour.

Table 2: Scheme of employee behaviour and customer behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EMPLOYEE BEHAVIOUR</th>
<th>CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee citizenship behaviour</td>
<td>Employee dysfunctional behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness (Role behaviours well beyond minimum required levels)</td>
<td>Abuse (Physical or psychological harmful behaviours towards others)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism (Helping others)</td>
<td>Production deviance (Failing on purpose to perform work tasks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic virtue (Responsible participation in the political life of the organisation)</td>
<td>Sabotage (Destroying property belonging to the employer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sportsmanship (Positive attitude, not complaining)</td>
<td>Theft (Stealing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtesy (Treating others with respect)</td>
<td>Withdrawal (Absence, arriving late, leaving early, taking longer breaks than authorized)</td>
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Service research from a managerial perspective is mainly one-sided as most studies on employee behaviour address the question of how their behaviour
influences customer service satisfaction; those studies usually ignore the effects customer behaviour may have on employee behaviour. A shop assistant in our study blames customers for most service failures as she says,

> When the service encounter goes wrong, it’s usually because of the customer’s attitude. I’m open and I have a friendly attitude towards everyone who enters the store. I believe customers who are grumpy create some kind of negative atmosphere and consequently the [service] encounter may go wrong. [...] I actually believe it depends on the customer. You could say that he or she sets the tone.

Normally the customer is portrayed as being an active co-producer of service, doing his or her share in order to facilitate the service. The customer and the provider are believed to pull in the same direction - working together towards a shared goal. When it comes to the ‘holy’ concept of customer satisfaction, however, the service management literature portrays the customer almost like an object without influence or responsibility for the outcome. Of course, customers are not a homogeneous group and their behaviour and attitude may be different. A tour rep in our study recalls an event called singles’ week and says ‘it was every possible strange mixture of people and I got to understand why some of them were single.’ A partial exception from this uncritical view of customers and customer behaviour is Wallace and de Chernatony’s (2008:155) study in which managers agree that some customers have unrealistic demands. One store manager says,

> Complaints can be anything from not liking the design of the store, to the colour of the facade, to the service, to “the place is too busy”, to the “why can’t you trade more hours?”, to “why can’t you sell certain products that we don’t see?” to we shouldn’t be selling certain products that we do sell.

Customers’ arrogant, bad, or demanding behaviour affects employees and their behaviour, which is apparent in the following statements:

> Some customers come in with a cavilling attitude, sort of ‘listen dear, I’ve been all over the world. You have not.’ They sit there trying to teach me who knows these trips. [...] Usually I don’t put a lot of energy into them because they are not pleasant customers. They may as well turn to someone else or book on the internet. [Travel agent]

> [Some customers] are f**king never satisfied. If they’re not satisfied they should not return but they do, constantly complaining. A lot of times, I really long for vengeance; thinking how good it would feel spitting in their food or something. I sort of get my revenge just by thinking about it and then I bite the bullet, telling myself that maybe they will leave satisfied, if only for today. [Waitress]
Employees’ unwillingness to perform accordingly to what Zeithaml et al. (1990) call service excellence is viewed occasionally as organisational misbehaviour in general or specifically service sabotage. It is interesting to notice how employees’ service behaviour is described either as excellent or deviant – there seems to be nothing in between. The managers in Wallace and de Chernatony’s (2008:157) study agree that ‘saboteurs are difficult to spot at the recruitment stage’, which gives a hint to the opinion among managers that some people would be saboteurs almost by nature and not as a result of experienced working conditions. Any employee who does not meet the expectations of the customer’s needs, wishes or demands is seen somewhat as a deficient worker. It is remarkable that some managers, as well as some researchers, seem to ignore the obvious impact of customer attitude on employees’ willingness to provide service.

Someone may come at the last minute saying ‘I want this and this’ and I reply ‘sorry we’re rapping up’. Then he or she might ask ‘What do you have instead? What can you get me? Is there anything?’ and then I automatically become compliant, since the customer is not demanding. If they are nice, of course I’ll help them but if they are impolite I just say ‘Sorry, we’re closed’ or ‘We’re out of food, won’t get anything until tomorrow.’ [Waitress]

I have encountered drunk and aggressive guests but that’s where the line is drawn. There’s a limit to what guests are allowed to do and they can’t do whatever they want. You have to put your foot down and show them that enough is enough. [Tour rep]

Right or wrong, researchers with a managerial perspective may claim that service providers are obliged to give customers excellent service regardless of their personal opinion about a specific customer and regardless of how they are treated by a specific customer – employees are hired to provide service and that is what they are paid to do. Nevertheless, customer attitude will most certainly influence service in some way or another whether you like it or not.

Employee adaptability is an essential feature in service work in terms of customer satisfaction (Fuller & Smith 1996; Bettencourt & Gwinner 1996; Sparks et al. 1997). It is obvious that it is the customer’s perception of service quality that matters, not the employee’s; Zeithaml et al. (1990:16) believe that ‘the only criteria that count in evaluating service quality are defined by customers. Only customers judge quality; all other judgements are essentially irrelevant.’ The rhetoric in the management literature on services is also visible
in employees’ perception of how to treat customers (table 3). The notion of personalized or customised treatment is widespread since most service employees agree with the statement that ‘customers differ and it is important to treat every single customer on their own terms.’ Nine out of ten employees agree at a high level and more women than men have a slightly higher propensity for customisation.

Table 3: Agreement with the statement ‘Customers differ and it is important to treat every single customer on their own terms’. Chi-Square: 0.002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High agreement</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low agreement</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No agreement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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</table>

Segmentation of customers has been a central concept for marketers as well as organisations. The idea of customer segmentation is that different customers have different preferences and in the context of customer focus, with its tailor-made solutions, it is important for employees to become aware of the preferences of each customer. The ability to ‘read’ customers as to what they appreciate and prefer in the service encounter is a necessary skill according to the management literature. Our study reveals that 70 percent of service employees claim to have some ability to immediately categorize customers as competent, well-off, urbane, price conscious and so on, while 30 percent claim to have no ability for such categorization (table 4).

Table 4: Ability to immediately categorize customers (competent; well-off; urbane; price conscious etc). Chi-Square: 0.452

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great ability</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low ability</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No ability</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An illustration of customer categorisation is provided by Abiala (2000:113, writers' translation) when a hairdresser in her study says,

You look at body language, read a lot on how people are. We are very good at that. We see the whole picture. What shoes she’s wearing. The shoes give away your identity. I’m not about to shave the head of a girl wearing court shoes; if she wants her head shaved she is wearing heavy boots.

A waitress/bartender in our study says she has developed the ability to spot almost immediately troublesome guests:

It’s that look, when they look at you and kind of stare right through you, and soon it comes: the finger snap. [...] I’ve done this for 20 years; probably I can tell who’s going to cause trouble at the moment they come through the door. [Waitress/bartender]

Customers may be categorised based on various criteria such as age, gender, social class, economic status, perceived experience and so forth. The categorization of customers starts immediately at the service encounter and influences the interplay between customer and employee (Abiala 2000). For example, waitresses or servers at restaurants seat customers based on various criteria such as estimation of the guest’s propensity for tipping well (Abiala 2000) and shop assistants in more fashionable clothing stores aim their service at well-dressed customers (Åmossa 2004).

We’re supposed to give every customer the same service but it goes without saying that a potential ‘big spender’ gets more assistance and better service. [Shop assistant]

You estimate customers on the basis of social class although you shouldn’t. A carpenter may have a lot of money although he comes to the store in his freaking working clothes, looking dirty, while a customer in a suite may be the cheapest person alive. [Shop assistant]

The interviews clearly show that age is an important factor when it comes to customer treatment; elderly customers are treated with more respect.

I’m more polite to elderly customers; I may greet them with ‘good afternoon’ instead of ‘what’s up?’ [...] The big difference is I try to be more courteous and knowledgeable when the customer is elderly. [Shop assistant]

Opinions about customers based on gender are noticeable in the following comments from female shop assistants in clothing stores (Abiala 2000:115, writers' translation):
Men usually put on what you suggest. Men are easier to deal with if you have several customers at the same time. It’s a bit easier, funnier with men, they listen more. [...] I put out the garments and he decides. Men need more help in some way.

Women they know, have always an opinion about how it should look when you enter a store. They are more often out browsing and know what to wear. They like to try on. A woman takes with her seven garments when she’s heading towards the fitting room.

The notion that men are easier to deal with is also mentioned by a waitress in our study who says,

Men are actually more polite I think. Women yell more. [...] That’s my experience. It’s also easier to hush men – ‘hush, you have to be quiet for a while.’ It’s easier to train men; training women is difficult. [Waitress/bartender]

The gender aspect probably influences employee opinions about how men and women are as customers; dealing with customers of the opposite sex is perhaps easier in some service settings and the service context itself may bring about some gender differences. The quantitative data, however, does not show any preferences among service providers regarding the customer’s sex.

Although researchers with a profitability perspective on services have shown great interest in the actual meeting (encounter, interaction, relationship) between employees and customers, it is still unclear what creates quality in the service meeting from the customer’s point of view (Gremler & Gwinner 2000). A common strategy of managing, or even avoiding, the issue of how service quality is comprised at a very concrete level, is to disregard any kind of ‘objective content’ and instead emphasise that the encounter between customer and employee should contain whatever the customer wants. Service quality, therefore, is subjective. Fuller and Smith (1996) confirm this fact when they claim that different aspects make different customers satisfied – it may be quick attendance, friendly treatment, empathy, getting information and knowledge or even having the opportunity to small talk. Likewise, Echeverri and Edvardsson (2002) state that customers have different needs, wishes, and expectations, and customers perceive the same aspect, for example an employee, differently. Not only do customers perceive employees differently but also vice versa. A bartender in our study says,

There is a bunch of customers who likes me; there is a bunch that likes X. Then there is the opposite, certainly a bunch who doesn’t like X, and a bunch who doesn’t like me. But it’s usually mutual. So if a customer who you don’t want anything to do with comes in, you switch sections. [...] I may think a particular customer is the most unpleasant person and then X thinks ‘but [he/she] is so nice’. Then there’s the opposite [...] so it’s very personal.
The customer's personal opinion about the employee as an individual may influence perceived service quality as Fuller and Smith (1996) conclude that personal qualities such as a flirtatious behaviour can affect the customer's perception of service quality.

To summarize, customer focus means being attentive to any needs, wishes, desires, expectations, and demands customers may have and additionally trying to fulfil them. If this is accomplished, service quality is supposedly present. Such a conclusion does not explain much, however, and what constitutes service quality is still hazy. What it does say is that customer focus and customer perceived service quality probably emerge when the employee puts the customer first. Our study shows that a majority of service employees always put the desires and needs of customers before their personal well-being, which leads to the conclusion that customer focus is prevalent in the service sector (table 5). The difference between men and women is small and not statistically significant, which makes us question the wide-spread notion of women being more attentive to the needs of others.

Table 5: The desires of customers versus the well-being of the employee. Chi-Square: 0.128

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer desire is always superior to my personal well-being</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer desire is sometimes superior to my personal well-being</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer desire is never superior to my personal well-being</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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</table>

These results correspond well with the results from a study (Bergman & Ivarsson, forthcoming) of employees in the retail sector in which 69 percent state that 'customer desire is always superior to my personal well-being' and 76 percent claim they 'often do that little extra for customers.' When our respondents were asked if they work according to the phrase 'the customer is always right', a majority do to some extent (table 6). The pattern is still similar for men and women.
Table 6: Agreement with the phrase ‘the customer is always right’. Chi-Square: 0.459

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement with the phrase ‘the customer is always right’</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High agreement with the phrase ‘the customer is always right’</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low agreement with the phrase ‘the customer is always right’</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No agreement with the phrase ‘the customer is always right’</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
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**THE SOVEREIGN CUSTOMER? SUPERIORITY AND SUBORDINATION**

Along with the notion of customer focus, comes the concept of uniqueness meaning that every customer should be greeted and treated in a personalised manner where the employee acknowledges the needs and wishes of each unique customer. In an overriding way, it is a matter of employee adaptability to match the service preferences of the customer (e.g. Fuller & Smith 1996; Bettencourt & Gwinner 1996; Sparks et al. 1997; Zeithaml 2000). According to Zeithaml et al. (1990), the customer alone has the right to define service quality as well as decide whether a particular firm fulfils the criteria for delivering service quality. Obviously, such a belief is linked to the notion of customer sovereignty and the phrase ‘the customer is always right’. If the customer is always right, then his or her wishes, needs, and demands are automatically superior to any possible contrary opinion of the employee. Such a standpoint is stated explicitly by Echeverri and Edvardsson (2002:26,) that ‘it is important to point out that customer interest is superior to employee interest’. The generalized picture of the service interaction is that service providers need to be flexible and service-minded enough to meet the needs and expectations of every customer.

I have been asked by customers to fetch things in their room. In those situations, I feel like a bit of a servant. Where the line is drawn between giving service and being used is sort of up to you. That balancing is thin as a hair. [Tour rep]

Theoretically, the idea of customer sovereignty would bring inequality to the customer-employee interaction shaped by superiority and subordination in which the customer owns the right to define the situation and dictate the
conditions for the interaction. Consequently, some scholars claim that the relationship between customers and employees is similar to the relationship between masters and servants, where the customer is in charge and the employee has to comply with every whim (Macdonald & Sirianni 1996; Abiala 2000). Customer superiority is questioned, however, by Bolton and Houlihan (2005:694) who state that ‘it is not only service providers who recognise that the sovereign consumer is something of a mythical image – customers are also very aware of their place in the scheme of things.’ Reality is not black and white and the truth would probably be that sometimes customers are superior, sometimes employees are superior, and sometimes the relation is characterized by (at least an illusion of) equity. Some respondents discuss superiority and subordination in the following example:

The customer has more power since he usually knows what he wants when entering the agency, and it’s my job to see that he gets what he wants, sort of. But I wouldn’t say I’m in a disadvantaged position and he looks down on me because he’s the customer and I should do what he asks; …not subordinated but I try to help them [customers] the best I can. [Ultimately] he’s here because he wants assistance. [Travel agent]

The idea behind my job is somewhat to be a servant so of course there are times I feel a bit subordinated. On the other hand, I become superior when the customer isn’t knowledgeable and feels insecure regarding fashion and what colours he should wear. […] I guess I’m not superior that much, there are a few people wanting to find out more about the garments… [Shop assistant]

If a customer is very demanding or even a pain in the ass, I don’t provide the service the customer should get. I have no desire to run errands to the store-room if the customer is treating me as a helper […] I don’t feel like taking crap at work; I mean, I’m nobody’s servant [Shop assistant]

We can not find any empirical evidence that service employees in general experience themselves being subordinated. Presumably, the customer and the balance of power are not determined by the structural positions (customer-employee) to any higher degree. The sole fact that one person is there to execute a specific wish of another person does not automatically lead to subordination. If that was the case, one could perhaps argue that, for example, a patient with a broken arm seeking a doctor would be superior in the interaction between patient and physician. Leidner (1996:41) states that ‘the balance of power between customers and workers varies considerably in different kinds of interactive service work.’ This opinion is probably true and the interactive service work can be categorised in various ways. Walsh (1991:15) establishes that ‘there are fundamental differences between the public and private market sector, both in terms of the service provided and the conditions
When comparing employees in the public sector with those in the private sector (table 7), it appears that a significantly greater proportion of employees in the public sector experience being superior to the customer. The superiority of employees in public services (e.g. health care, education, city council) may partly derive from bureaucracy – if a customer wants special treatment or personalised service in some form, the employee can supposedly decline by referring to certain rules and regulations. Besides bureaucracy, some occupations in the public service sector hold high status (e.g. physicians), authority (police officers) and/or include empowerment (teachers), which all prevent the ‘customers’ from defining situations and dictating circumstances. It may be interesting to note that there are no gender differences as men and women perceive the balance of power similarly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public sector</th>
<th>Private sector</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generally superior to customers</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally equal to customers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally subordinated to customers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The balance of power between receiver and provider is probably not determined solely on the rules and regulations that exist in a specific service field or the legacy of traditional social hierarchy. Many occupations traditionally connected to authority (e.g. teachers, physicians, police officers) have lost some power in our late modern society. Getting rid of a paternalistic stance might be seen as a natural development but it has also been supported by politicians. The service ideal found in traditional consumer services has pushed its way into professional services as clients, patients, students and so forth increasingly are labelled as customers (Laing 2003). According to Barzelay (2001), this re-labelling is intended to bring a service-minded morale to professionals like physicians and teachers – primarily within the public sector. Laing et al. (2005), divide the professional-client (employee-customer) interaction into four types with different balances of power: (a) compliant interaction; (b) collaborative interaction; (c) confirmatory interaction; and (d) consumerist interaction. Compliant interaction is the traditional professional-client interaction model where clients (customers) rely on the professional’s (employee’s) expertise and
experience. In this type of interaction, the provider is superior and has authority to define situations and dictate conditions. A *collaborative interaction* is categorised by an employee/professional and a customer/client having a dialogue about how to handle a particular situation or errand; this type of interaction is based apparently on equality. In a *confirmatory interaction*, the client/customer has a clear vision of how a particular situation or errand should be handled but still wants approval from the employee. In the *consumerist interaction*, the employee is viewed at best as an adviser and at worst as a servant. In this type of service interaction, authority lies with the customer. Although the model by Laing et al. (2005) is designed primarily for interaction between professionals (e.g. physicians and lawyers) and their clients, it is interesting to see how service employees in general experience the service interaction with reference to customer behaviour. Our sample shows that a majority of employees perceive their relationship with customers in accordance with the collaborative interaction type (table 8).

In general, equality and consensus are perceived to be good for a society, and client participation has been on the agenda within operations such as health care (e.g. Calnan 1988) and education (e.g. Franz 1988). Involvement of clients is supposed to lead to mutual respect, absence of hierarchy, and joint decisions - all resulting in client satisfaction (Gabe et al. 2004). The ideas from new public management are connected closely to the notions within the service management literature, where customer satisfaction is thought to increase with customer involvement. When comparing perceived interaction types with experienced balance of power, it is clear that the more self-confident the customers are – as to what they want – the more subordinated the employees feel, and vice versa (table 9).

### Table 8: Employee perception of Laing et al. (2005) interaction typology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of interaction</th>
<th>Power of balance</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compliant interaction</td>
<td>The employee is supposedly superior</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative interaction</td>
<td>The employee and the customer are supposedly equal</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmatory interaction</td>
<td>The employee is supposedly subordinated</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumerist interaction</td>
<td>The employee is supposedly subordinated</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

32
Table 9: The correlation between perceived interaction type and perceived balance of power.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Compliant interaction</th>
<th>Collaborative interaction</th>
<th>Confirmatory interaction</th>
<th>Consumerist interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The customer has a vague picture of the situation and I am in authority.</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The customer and I have a dialogue regarding the situation.</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The customer has a clear picture of the situation but seek my approval.</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The customer has a clear picture of the situation and my advice is not requested.</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any given service provider might feel subordinated in the interaction with some customers and superior when interacting with others. A shop assistant says she sometimes feel inferior and says ‘usually I have more knowledge than the customer but if someone who knows exactly what he needs or wants comes along I may get the feeling of being run over.’

Sometimes the balance of power is dependent on each participant's skills and knowledge within the field. A concrete example of this is a tour rep in our study who says he feels superior and sometimes acts out on that superiority when taking a group of tourists skiing but feels subordinate when there is an excursion up in the mountains and there is a geologist in the group. ‘I felt very inferior but I learned a lot from that person [the geologist]. ‘Knowledge is power’ said Sir Francis Bacon in 1597, which is also true at times in the interaction between customers and employees.

Goffman (1959) concludes that service employees’ working conditions depend on the ability to grab and retain initiative in the service encounter. Such a capacity demands a subtle aggressiveness in the employee when he or she has lower socio-economic status than the customer. The built-in frame of inequality (employees being there to serve customers) may result in some kind of desire to hold one's own. When encountering customers who implicitly or explicitly signal some kind of superiority, the service provider may use his or her skills trying to turn the table.
Guaranteed I take them [the skiing group] to the most difficult slopes; going fast all the time on a skiing level way above them. I disparage them, breaking them down. [Tour rep/Ski instructor]

Our study reveals that 41 percent of respondents find some satisfaction in showing customers who is in charge but it is also important to note that only 8 percent experience great satisfaction from letting customers know who runs the show. Employees in charge of the service encounter is brought to light by Goffman (1959) who provides an example (among others) of a waitress in a restaurant who manages to clear the table a customer is sitting at. Åmossa (2004) also demonstrates how shop assistants in a fashionable clothing department store more or less ignore customers who give an impression of low socio-economic status. The latter is supported by Ainscough and Motley (2000) who conclude that poorly dressed customers have to wait longer to receive service than better-dressed customers. These examples indicate that service employees are not as subservient as some think and according to our data, a considerable proportion of employees actually feel superior to the customer (table 7). A chef in Harris and Ogbonna’s (2002:176) study says, ‘Well I don’t work here for the money or the company! No, seriously it’s fun, enjoyable, and damn satisfying when you pull off a real stunt!’

Echeverri and Edvarsson (2002:469, writers’ translation) claim that ‘customers are not interested in just receiving a service; they want a personal experience’. This belief exists among service personnel and 60 percent think it is more important to provide experiences and stimulation of the senses than strictly focus on the services or goods in question.

If you go to a café for example, you buy an experience. Anyone can make a cup of coffee at home, which certainly is 40 times cheaper... but getting an experience along with the purchase is really important. The customer should leave the store feeling we’ve done everything for him or her, being satisfied with the visit. [Shop assistant]

ORGANISATIONAL SETTING AND CUSTOMER SEGMENT

Organisational setting, which should be viewed as a whole package, refers to (at least partly) deliberate strategies for attracting customers and a particular organisation can more or less choose an ordinary setting or an exclusive setting. These concepts mean that firms can go for an image of everydayness that send out signals of availability (everyone is invited) or strive for an exclusive image
that is intended to bring along a certain exclusive customer segment (and in various ways complicate or even prevent other segments from participation).

In an increasingly competitive market where the customers have a range of alternatives at hand, researchers suggest that firms need to add unique value for the customer that is difficult for competitors to copy (Zeithaml et al. 1990; Echeverri and Edvardsson 2002; Levy et al. 2004). It is important that customers experience something special from the company, whether it is of mostly symbolic value (projecting certain feelings) or physical features. Klein (2002) refers to Starbucks and its vice president who says that people are not coming to Starbucks just for the coffee but for the shimmer of romance and the feeling of warmth and fellowship that they receive at the shops. Buildings and interior can project organisational identity and can therefore act as markers of factors such as high status and good taste (Berg & Kreiner 1990). ‘New consumers’ choices are largely determined by the aura, personality, image or message of products, producers or places of consumption’ (Dagevos 2005:36).

In order to appeal to customers, organisations must portray themselves as being unique in some way. Competing with uniqueness in company image, however, is not the only approach for success. Still many organisations choose to focus on the logics of mass production and mass consumption (Kotler & Armstrong 1993). We can see that two out of three service employees perceive their organisation as ordinary and a higher proportion of women than men state that their organisation’s image is quite or very ordinary (table 10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very exclusive</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite exclusive</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite ordinary</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very ordinary</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our data show that organisations with an ordinary image are more likely to aim at ‘anyone’ and their customers mirror the community to a greater extent, whereas organisations with an exclusive image have ‘certain’ customers to a higher degree (table 11).
Table 11: Organisational image and customer segment. Chi-Square: 0.001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicitly targeting at a certain group of customers</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anyone is welcome but in reality there is a certain group of customers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anyone is welcome and our customers mirror the community</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer segment is not relevant for the organisation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to compete there are roughly two different strategies from which to choose. Firms may adopt concepts developed within service management and service marketing in which uniqueness and service excellence is prominent. This approach, however, leads to increased costs, for which many customers are willing to pay (Mossberg 2003). The other strategy in competition is primarily low price, which necessarily means that there is no room for any spectacular features. Table 12 clearly shows a relation between organisational image and pricing.

Table 12: Organisational image and pricing. Chi-Square: 0.000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher pricing than competitors</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same pricing as competitors</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower pricing than competitors</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goods/services are free or subsidized</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although segmentation has been an important concept in marketing (Dickson 1982), dividing customers into different segments seems, in some way, to have lost its appeal within the service research field, partly because of instability due to rapid changes in customers’ needs and preferences (Blocker & Flint 2006). Dagevos (2005:33) claims that ‘modern consumers defy traditional segmentation by age, gender or income.’ There seems to be an ideological notion that there are as many differences between customers as there are customers, illustrated by the concept of tailor-made services for the unique
customer. Such an idea also tends to lead towards an assumption that there are no systematic differences between customers.

For the most part, the customer is viewed in an individualized way so the picture of the customer is vague when it comes to factors such as sex, age, and class. There is not, however, a total absence of discussion. The age factor, for example, has been noticed by Tempest et al. (2002), and there are some studies on ethnic origin and its impact on service interaction (for example Furrer et al. 2000; Gilbert & Wong 2003). As well, many studies focus on gender to some extent (Iacobucci & Ostrom 1993; Mattila et al. 2003; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2003). For most part within the customer driven perspective, however, the customer is primarily a person with no particular sex, age or class. In addition to these factors, people can possess different types of capital (Bourdieu 1984). The most prominent is the division between economic capital (the wealthy) and cultural capital (the cultured). According to Bourdieu (1984:283), those with economic capital do not always have the taste to match their means while those with cultural capital hardly ever have the means to match their taste. This gap seems to have decreased so that economic capital and cultural capital tend to go increasingly hand in hand (Van Eijck & Oosterhout 2005). People who possess both economic and cultural capital can easily engage themselves in both popular and highbrow culture (Savage et al. 1992). Despite this development, there are probably still significant differences between the two groups. Even if both the wealthy and the cultural are materialistic and actively participate in the consumption society, they probably purchase different products and services (incl. brands) and they may be on opposite sides politically. Besides economic and cultural capital, we want to highlight technical capital, which simply means skills within a specific field (e.g. cars, computers or carpentry). While economic as well as cultural capital is all-embracing and influences almost all aspects of life (it is a total package), technical capital does not have the same impact. Put into service context, people who have technical capital may be interested in or fastidious about certain service quality factors in their specific area of interest/expertise but much less concerned when it comes to other areas. Previous research has suggested that perception of quality factors vary to some degree depending on the service in question (Kelley & Turley 2001). This is probably more accurate for those with technical capital than for those with economic or cultural capital.

Economic and cultural capital, respectively, are often illustrated by home furnishings, clothing, type of car, leisure activities, music and literature preferences and so forth, and usually there is a certain amount of pride in
showing one’s economic or cultural capital. As a parenthesis, there are some lifestyle magazines such as the Swedish *Stureplan* that reflect the whole world as being rich and fashionable; in the magazine’s autumn edition 2006 there are articles like ‘The world’s coolest hotels’ and ‘Autumn shopping’ (tips for jewellery, shoes, cars, couches, yachts etc. all with one thing in common: extremely high pricing). On the opposite pole, there are magazines such as *The Red Room* (Röda Rummet) and *Word-Front* (Ordfront) that target intellectuals mainly on the left wing.

In a service context, it is likely that customers are greeted and treated differently and to various degrees depending on whether or not they possess economic capital (the wealthy customer), cultural capital (the refined customer), technical capital (the skilled customer) or no significant capital at all. Customers who signify high status – due to a certain type of capital – likely receive better service if the firm and employees recognise and appreciate that kind of customer. In addition, the occurrence and the type of capital influences where people turn for their purchases; the firm in question must be able to provide what the customer is seeking. For example, it is likely that an expert in hi-fi equipment would not shop at an average home electronics chain store for new speakers, a customer with economic capital would not buy a new blazer at *H&M* or *Wal-Mart* and a cultivated person would not see ‘American Pie’ at the movies. The average customer of a certain firm, or even a whole line of businesses, must be compatible with the customer’s self-identity, that is, identification is important. Customers with a specific type of capital may not want to be seen at places (firms/stores) that generally attract people with whom he or she does not want to be associated. When service employees were asked to estimate their customers on the basis of economic, technical, and cultural capital, there was a significant difference between organisations with an ordinary image and organisations with an exclusive image (tables 13, 14, 15). It is believed that the customers of organisations with an exclusive image have more money, greater knowledge about the products and/or the services offered, and are more refined and sophisticated. According to Ryals and Knox (2001), 20 percent of customers provide firms with 80 percent of sales. Hence, it is important to focus on the most profitable customers and provide them with unique, personalised, and outstanding service (Zeithaml 2000; Zeithaml et al. 2002). This means that certain customers are considered more valuable. A shop assistant says, ‘Of course a customer who is inclined to spend more money gets better service.’
Table 13: Organisational image and employees’ estimation of their customers’ financial situation. Chi-Square: 0.000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our customers have quite a lot of money</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our customers mirror the community at large (some have lots of money, some have not)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our customers are not wealthy at all</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To have a certain type of capital means that the customer in question belongs to a segment that stands out from the general customer - either financially, culturally, or in terms of expertise within a certain area. To a certain extent, this capital will affect the expectations on the service relation in terms of customer satisfaction. Matching is an important issue and customer capital and organisational setting is crucial for the service interaction and its outcome.

Table 14: Organisational image and employees’ estimation of their customers’ technical knowledge. Chi-Square: 0.000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our customers have a lot of knowledge about the organisation’s line of products/services</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our customers mirror the community at large (some have knowledge, some have not)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our customers have little knowledge about the organisation’s line of products/services</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Firms with an ordinary organisational setting have usually chosen price competition and volume sales followed by passive service or self-service. With these strategies, the customer per se is anonymous and the value of any single customer is limited. In the marketing literature, the value of service excellence is emphasised as crucial for any service organisation but what exactly is service excellence, particularly when it comes to services categorised by an ordinary organisational setting? According to Pettinger (2006) who has studied the retail sector, self-service is the dominant form of selling.
Table 15: Organisational image and employees’ estimation of their customers’ culture level.
Chi-Square: 0.010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our customers are generally cultivated and have good taste</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our customers mirror the community at large (some are cultivated, some are not)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our customers are generally not cultivated and lack good taste</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sum</em></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When entering store chains like *IKEA* (furniture) and *H&M* (clothes), the employees do not usually approach the customers asking how they can be of assistance; instead, they rely on the customer to be active and ask employees for help if needed and even then the level of service would hardly qualify as excellent. Another example of this would be flying with *Ryan Air*, an airline that deliberately has chosen low price over service. The average customer of such firms is probably aware of the situation and holds low (service) expectations; therefore, customer expectations are met and service satisfaction rises. Conversely, if the customer possesses capital that generates expectations of personalised and tailor-made active service, such firms will be unable to meet those expectations, which will lead to poor customer satisfaction. Organisations with low prices and volume sales tend to drop their service ambitions, leaving little or no room for customers to dictate conditions (Pettinger 2006).

When it comes to firms with exclusive organisational settings, it is more important that those customers with appreciated capital are served in an active way by the employees. These types of organisational settings are built on a different logic and hence the relation with each (wanted) customer is valued. Customers with significant capital may hold certain expectations about service and as long as the firm can meet or even exceed these expectations, the condition for long-term relationships exists. Since exclusivity per se can not be for everyone, these kind of firms must be able to differentiate between wanted and unwanted customers. Since it is impossible to forbid certain customers to enter a store or make purchases, the employees have to rely on other tactics like ignoring the customer or even being snotty – all with the purpose of letting the customer know that he or she is unwanted. This may seem a strange business strategy but in order to keep the wanted and most profitable customers, sometimes others must be kept at bay.
Research within customer relationship management has shown how loyal customers result in profitable firms. Loyalty is about getting to know the customers well, providing excellent service, and foreseeing customers’ needs (Berry 1995; Goodhue et al. 2002). Even if many large firms have adopted this idea by introducing loyalty programmes and behavioural policies where employees are supposed to interact with customers in a familiar mode, this approach would be most suitable to a small business – at least if the company wants to get the most out of it. Theoretically, one can assume that organisations with an exclusive image develop a different kind of relationship with their customers compared to organisations with an ordinary image. One hypothesis would be that customers of an exclusive company become known to the employees partly because the number of customers would be smaller but also because the interaction between employee and customer would be different. Pettinger’s (2004) study, for example, shows obvious variation in service between more exclusive clothing stores and companies offering cheap fashion. Our data, however, do not reveal any differences in terms of customers being known or anonymous to employees and therefore we have to falsify the hypothesis (table 16).

Within the customer driven perspective, service excellence is a key factor for success (Zeithaml et al. 1990), and it consists mainly of service employees not only actively responding to customers’ needs, demands, and wishes but also exceeding them in various ways (Sparks et al. 1997; Schneider & Bowen 1998; Gremler & Gwinner 2000; Gowan et al. 2001). Our data clearly show that employees working in settings that are more exclusive are more keen to provide service beyond the customer’s expectation (table 17).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 16: Organisational image and customers being known or anonymous. Chi-Square: 0.487</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The customers are more or less known to employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The customers are more or less anonymous to employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 17: Organisational image and providing service beyond customer expectation. Chi-Square: 0.015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often trying to provide service beyond customer expectation</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom trying to provide service beyond customer expectation</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never trying to provide service beyond customer expectation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Featherstone (1991) argues that mass production and mass consumption have lost their appeal since they can not satisfy what today’s customers seek or prefer. Experiences and emotions have become increasingly more important for customers in recent years (Lewis & Bridger 2000; Mossberg 2003). It is not only functionality, therefore, that matters when products or services are purchased and customers pay extra for satisfying emotional needs, but also the general experiences within the context of consumption (Mossberg 2003). This notion is not clear-cut, however, as customers are more interested in the practical than the hedonistic aspects of consumption (Bäckström & Johansson 2006). Therefore two different approaches can be identified – functionality versus functionality and experience. Our respondents were asked about what ideal fit their organisation best and surprisingly there is no difference between employees in exclusive settings and employees in ordinary settings (table 18).

Table 18: Organisational image and consumption idea. Chi-Square: 0.969

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stimulation of the senses is important; not only focus on the product/service itself</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the product/service is most important</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Traditionally, occupational status and pride are decided by factors such as educational level and skills required. As for the service sector, Hall (1994:76) concludes that much service work is ‘low in visibility, low in power, and low in status.’ There can be great variation within same occupations, however, due to either personal or organisational factors. For instance, Åmossa (2004) shows
how shop assistants working in a fashionable clothing department express great occupational pride. Our study supports Åmossa’s findings; working for a company or an organisation with an exclusive image is connected to feeling great occupational pride to a much higher degree than working for an organisation with an ordinary image (table 19).

Table 19: Organisational image and occupational pride. Chi-Square: 0.000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great occupational pride</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather high occupational pride</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather low occupational pride</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No occupational pride</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CUSTOMER SERVICE: TYPOLOGY, LEVEL, AND INTENSITY

Pettinger (2004) divides customer service into three service-escalating types: self-service, routine service, and personal service. In a self-service system, the customers are left on their own - browsing, selecting, and sometimes even paying without any assistance from employees. Self-service is accompanied usually by self-service technologies (Curran et al. 2003). One obvious and widespread example of self-service technology is the internet where customers single-handedly take care of their business. Other examples may be cash dispensers in banking and unmanned gas stations. In recent years, an increasing proportion of food stores have adopted a technical self-service system that enables customers to personally scan the groceries for price and go through the checkout counter without any employee involvement. 'Routine service' refers to the essential service work that keeps the [business] functioning (Pettinger 2004:174), most notably taking care of economic transactions but also monitoring and supervising customers. Routine service is of a repetitive nature with little variation in how different customers are treated although employees and customers may engage in ‘brief conversations as the routine transactions are processed’ (Pettinger 2004:174). Personal service is more than routine
service as the employee puts in effort on behalf of the customer; examples of this are shop assistants in clothing stores who offer to lay aside a specific garment for later or give personal advice as to what suits the customer in question. Personal service often involves emotional labour and demands social and cultural skills as well as knowledge within the firm’s line of business. The literature on service from a customer perspective highlights the importance of providing service beyond the customer’s expectation in order to obtain customer satisfaction, which is believed to foster customer loyalty, positive word of mouth, and in the long run profitability. In our sample, a majority of the respondents agree that they often try to provide service beyond the customer’s expectations (table 20). It is interesting to note that there are no differences between men and women although previous research has suggested that more women than men are service minded (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2003).

Table 20: Providing service beyond customer expectation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often trying to provide service beyond customer expectation</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom trying to provide service beyond customer expectation</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never trying to provide service beyond customer expectation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scholars with the profitability perspective on service seem to agree on the merits of personal/active service and that preferably customers’ expectation should be exceeded (Sparks et al. 1997; Schneider and Bowen 1998; Gremler and Gwinner 2000; Gowan et al. 2001).

> It’s important to take the time. My shift might have ended at 5 pm but still I want to make sure the guest has the things they were supposed to get, or I want to check that information was received, although my shift is over. [Tour rep]

> We work hard to provide the best service possible. We even document occasions when we provide T.L.E – That Little Extra. [Shop assistant]

One of our respondents discusses service:

> I think I’m very service minded, you know ‘opening doors for elderly.’ Service and manners – common sense – go hand in hand. If I’m on the streetcar and Asta who is 80 years old gets on, I offer her my seat. That’s a service to her but I also do it because it’s common sense; letting that old lady sit instead of me. [Travel agent]
In a study by Bergman and Ivarsson (forthcoming), a vast majority of employees in the retail sector claim they usually do that ‘little extra’ for the customer. As an example of that ‘little extra’, one of the respondents says she makes sure the customer does not leave any of their groceries behind and she is careful the milk does not wreck the bread at the checkout counter. One may argue, however, whether such examples are signs of extraordinarily service and service beyond the expected or if it is simply a case of expected service or decent manners. A shop assistant in our qualitative study says they [the company] sometimes offer customers coffee, candy or fruit, and if a customer buys a lot, he or she may be given socks or underwear free of charge – ‘it is usually very appreciated.’

Another division of service is the range from self-service to service overkill (figure 3). The gap model (Parasuraman et al. 1988) tries to capture the variation between a customer’s service expectation and his or her service experience. If a service experience is below expectations, the customer will likely be dissatisfied and if a service experience is beyond expectations, the customer will be positively surprised. In addition, Paulins (2005) concludes that customers who expect a low level of service tend to be satisfied with low levels of service. Customers are, however, heterogenic as one customer may define a particular service performance as active service while another customer would call it passive service, and so on. Such a conclusion may be illustrated by a customer in Ryan and Rodriguez’s (2001:262) study on shopping, who describes shop assistants in the following way: ‘it is like you have a shadow following you around everywhere telling you that everything looks great on you when in reality, it does not.’ The active service strategy, which is assumed to be appreciated, may be annoying as one customer says, ‘I hate having all these shopping assistants around… asking what I want. I prefer to go freely around the shop and decide on my own’ (Ryan & Rodriguez 2001:262). It is difficult, or maybe even impossible, to objectively classify a specific service performance into a certain service level category.

![Figure 3: The range of customer service.](image)

Often the level of service is linked to pricing and exclusiveness. According to Pettinger (2004:176), ‘personal service is more extensive at stores at the top end
of the market’ while stores that focus on low price provide minimal personal service. This is supported by Abiala (2000:110, writers’ translation) who claims that ‘a customer who pays more has greater demands on personal service’. A tourist guide in Abiala’s (2000:110, writers’ translation) study puts it this way:

Our guests in Thailand are different from our guests in the Canary Islands; a smaller number of people with lots of money. [...] They are more used to traveling and demand a lot more. They know that they have paid a lot of money and they have high demands.

Linked to this passage, Pettinger (2004:176) observed in her study on fashion retail, how employees in low-price stores declined to help the customer who asked for assistance (i.e. look for a different size) by saying ‘you’ll have to go and look yourself’ or ‘I’m sorry, I can’t leave the fitting room’, which is clearly an example of self-service. Pettinger (2004:176) additionally states that shoppers ‘accepting low prices for the cheap fashion on offer as a trade-off against the absence of personal service’. Our data supports Pettinger’s findings since there is a significant difference between organisations with an ordinary image and those with an exclusive one in providing service beyond customer expectation (table 21). Employees in organisations with an exclusive image seem to be more service-minded than are employees in organisations with an ordinary image – at least when it comes to self-evaluation.

Table 21: Providing service beyond customer expectation linked to organisational image. Chi Square: 0.015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never trying to provide service</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beyond customer expectation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom trying to provide service</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beyond customer expectation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often trying to provide service</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beyond customer expectation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although many researchers within marketing suggest that price is not a competitive factor, many successful companies have chosen low pricing instead of ‘excellent’ service (Kotler & Armstrong 1993) – Ryan Air, Food Lion, H&M, IKEA and so forth. All of these companies’ service (presumably) ranges from self-service to passive service. IKEA (furniture sales) is probably one of the world’s greatest examples of the self-service ideology because the assemble part is usually left to the customers. A business idea built on customers doing most of the work is illustrated in an episode of the sitcom Seinfeld in which the
character Kramer comes up with an idea for a pizzeria where customers prepare and bake their own pizza – in fact, the customer is paying to do all the work usually performed by personnel. Fiction is not, however, far from reality as Mossberg, in her book ‘To create experiences – from ok to wow’, retells how she participated in Swedish Taste’s arrangements where ‘ordinary’ people pay a considerable sum of money for cooking their own three-course dinner – although under guidance of professional chefs. Mossberg (2003:12) says, ‘for me, this was an ultimate dinner experience’. One might consider the differences between assembling a piece of furniture from IKEA in the privacy of your home and cooking your own dinner on the premises of Swedish Taste. As previously mentioned, it is not easy to draw a line between the various types of service and customer decision on service quality.

Gutek et al. (2000), talk conversely about three types of customer-employee contact with escalating intensity: (a) encounter, (b) pseudo relationships, and (c) relationships. An encounter is categorised primarily as a brief and temporary meeting between customer and service provider, sometimes due to almost coincidence. For example, it does not matter if the customer cuts his or her hair at saloon X or saloon Y – ‘customers who receive service in encounters cannot name a particular person they would see for service’ (Gutek et al. 2000:321). A pseudo relationship is formed when a person is a recurrent customer but does not get to know or even interact with any specific employee. In a relationship, however, ‘a customer can identify a particular person as his or her service provider (Gutek et al. 2000:321). Within each of these types, the customer service per se may range from self-service to service overkill (figure 3).

Within the profitability perspective, it has gradually become a recognized fact that (service) firms should focus on building long-term relationships with their customers since it is perceived to result in strategic advantages in the marketplace instead of focusing on isolated transactions (Beatty et. al 1996; Echeverri & Edvardsson 2002). Customer relationship management is primarily about acquiring customers, getting to know them well, providing services and foreseeing their needs (Goodhue et al. 2002). According to Noble and Phillips (2004:290), the essence of relationship marketing is ‘identifying consumers’ needs through communication and rewarding them for their patronage.’ In general, approximately 30 percent of customers switch provider because they believe a competitor’s assortment is of higher quality or superior utility, while about 70 percent switch provider because of poor customer support (Söderlund 1997). It seems to be an obvious fact that ‘the relationship between the firm
and its customers is critical to the firm’s survival and success’ (Bendapudi & Berry 1997:16).

The development of long-term relationships is believed to not only benefit the organisation but the customer as well (Noble & Phillips 2004); something that is often referred to as a ‘win-win situation’ (Storbacka & Lehtinen 2001). Many services per se are of a nature that actually requires continuous membership (Lovelock 1983) and according to Berry and Parasuraman (1991) customers want ongoing close relationships with their service providers. A (reliable) relationship has a tendency to reduce the perceived risk of doing business with a firm that offers intangibility products (Bendapudi & Berry 1997). Even if or when a (service) failure does occur, the established relationship – containing loyalty – serves as a buffer, meaning that the firm may not be affected in any severe way, like losing customers (Bolton et al. 2000).

A relationship is likely to persist only as long as both the firm and the customer benefit (Frazier & Summers 1986) and from the firm’s point of view ‘benefits include greater sales, more positive word of mouth, lower costs per transaction, and most importantly, customer loyalty and retention’ (Beatty et al. 1996). Developing relationships with customers brings along increased costs (Bendapudi and Berry 1997) and the relationship is profitable to the firm only if it last longer than it takes to cover these investments (Becker 1960). Since 20 percent of customers provide firms with 80 percent of sales (Ryals & Knox 2001), it is important to focus on the most profitable customers and provide them with unique, personalised and outstanding service (Zeithaml 2000; Zeithaml et al. 2002). Firms need to convert satisfied customers into loyalists because in the end, loyalty means that the customers will recommend the specific firm, talk favourably about the business, and the loyal customer tends to be flexible and tolerant (Cardis 2006). In this context, brand equity – which can be defined as ‘the degree to which the brand fits a customer’s personality and lifestyle’ (Johnson et al. 2006:123) – is important depending on the type of business. The benefits of loyalty are illustrated by Cardis (2006) who describes the company Harley Davidson. In the mid 1980’s they were on the brink of bankruptcy due to problems with unsatisfied customers and poor product quality. To reverse the development, the company decided to commit to the most enthusiastic and passionate Harley Davidson riders by launching the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) with the following mission: to ride and have fun. By this ‘fan club’, a magazine, and various events – all targeted at the most avid owners – Harley Davidson managed to create a thrilling experience around its product and a subculture of loyal and tolerant customers who embrace the
brand as a lifestyle. The economic value speaks for itself since the stock price changed from 34 cents to more than 60 dollars per share (ibid).

Since firms constantly try to take over customers of competitors with (initial) attractive deals, price cuts and so forth, it is important for a firm to develop close customer relationships that are attractive enough for the customer to remain loyal. According to Berry (1995), there are three levels of relationship marketing tactics: the first level includes, for example, customer loyalty cards where people are rewarded for loyalty in the form of discounts or gifts. The second level is about social bonds, for example, where employees ought to recognise customers on sight and by name and make conversation on a regular basis. To foster social bonding, firms can arrange various types of events for selected customers in order to make them feel special by belonging to a group of important customers. The third level is about keeping customers by high switching costs, meaning some kind of service (value-adding benefits) that is difficult or expensive for customers to get on their own or from a competitor since the service is based on individual information and preferences.

Loyalty is a fundamental to service relationships and customer relationship management, but loyalty within a business context has proven to be difficult to deal with. Previous research in the field has been unable to produce generalized results with a full understanding of the loyalty phenomenon (Bandyopadhyay & Martell 2006). The customer can be loyal to (a) a certain brand like Harley Davidson, Nike, Levi’s etc.; (b) a specific firm or retailer who carries preferred brands such as ‘Volvo of Richmond’ in Vancouver BC or ‘Harrods’ in London, UK; (c) a specific firm with no explicit connection to any specific brand such as some independent auto repairs, restaurants, hair salons and so forth.

To develop a service relationship, it is important that the employee show empathy, interpersonal care, trustworthy behaviour, and provide augmented personal service (Beatty et al. 1996). With service relationships, unlike service encounters, it has been established that authenticity – genuine feelings – is important for customer satisfaction (Grayson 1998; Van Dolen et al. 2004).

When it comes to customer relationships, our sample shows that 30 percent of service employees claim to have many regular customers whom they make conversation with, and an additional 27 percent state that they know most of their customers well and have even become friends with some. This means that about half of the service customers seem to be more than superficially known by employees and may perhaps fit the criteria for having a relationship with their service provider.
There are obviously different ways to assort the provision of service. Pettinger (2004) concludes, however, that there is no clear definition of what customer service really means or what customer service work involves. Nevertheless, the way employees interact with customers is viewed as an important service aspect – the customer service offered by employees is, however, ‘difficult to measure and for the [firm] to control’ (Paulins 2005:345).

**PROPER EMPLOYEE BEHAVIOUR IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS**

The aggregative picture from research with a profitability perspective is that the personnel are a key factor when it comes to service work. Harris and Ogbonna (2002:163) summarize this idea by saying that ‘the attitudes and behaviors of frontline, customer-contact service providers are a significant factor in customers’ perceptions and interpretations of service encounters’. Chebat et al. (2002:325) follow this line of thought as they suggest that ‘A service firm’s success depends ultimately upon the performance of its customer-contact employees’ and Chung and Schneider (2002:70) suggest that ‘service employees are largely responsible for quality control at the time of service delivery’. A shop assistant in our study embraced this notion as she declared, ‘I am there for them [the customers].’

The service performance aspect equivalent to employee behaviour in the service interaction, has been studied intensively over the years, although under different concepts such as service quality (Parasuraman et al. 1985; 1988), service encounter (Suprenant & Solomon 1987), and service relationships (Levitt 1983; Gutek et al. 2000). The majority of scholars in this line of research follow the profitability perspective and hence the research point of departure is usually the customer’s point of view of exemplary employee behaviour.

People in service work seem to be aware of what is expected of them and they genuinely seem to embrace the spirit of service. The following are some comments from our interviewees regarding how one should behave in their respective occupations:

- The employees must have the aspiration of making it as good as possible for the guests; otherwise they have chosen the wrong occupation. [Tour rep]

- [You have to be] happy and nice, ensuring the customer gets the most positive experience possible; alert and observant. [Waitress]
Of course you have to be nice; you must have a friendly and pleasant appearance. You have to look proper and smile a lot. [Tour rep]

As a receptionist, you’re the company’s public face and the first person the customer meets. [...] It’s important to be kind, perceptive, and knowledgeable. [Receptionist]

You ought be happy, open and service minded, well... positive. [Travel agent]

[You have to be] honest, perceptive, and competent. You have to really listen to the customers to understand what they want. [House salesman]

[You have to be ] nice and obliging; providing good service. [Waitress]

You ought to be socially gifted, open and nice. [Shop assistant]

It is prevalent how service providers frequently talk about being nice and friendly, and making sure customers are satisfied as the most important aspect of their work. It is interesting how the respondents emphasise social aspects and almost entirely ignore more technical skills when asked about occupational demands. Perhaps many service jobs do not require any significant skills besides social ones; it could actually be that technical skills, or professional knowledge, are not needed to any higher degree in these professions.

The quantitative material shows that the majority strongly believe that (a) people in service work must be interested in helping other persons, and (b) it is important to treat every customer on his/her terms. It seems that service providers generally and genuinely want customers to have a good experience, and employees in services seem to take pleasure in the interactive part of the work although showing a nuanced stance towards ‘customers always being right’ (table 22).

They say the customer is always right; it’s not 100 percent true but it’s absolutely somewhere you should begin. [Shop assistant]

Table 22: Customer contact and job satisfaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact with customers brings job satisfaction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers show appreciation for my work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to provide service beyond customer expectation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The customer is always right</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although service workers embrace the notion of satisfying the customer and try to do their best, it is not always easy. A customer in Ryan and Rodriguez’s (2001:261) study on shopping says:

In clothes shops, for example, the amount, type, and timing of the attention the sales assistants give me is critical to whether I will buy the item in the shop or return to shop again. I prefer the soft sell. I like to be acknowledged when I enter the shop, but I prefer to be left to browse until I initiate the requirement for assistance [...] It irritates me that so many assistants rush up to you when you enter. [...] Then later we actually require their help, they are totally inept at identifying that a customer would like assistance and are always too deeply involved in the task of folding jumpers [...] I find that very few assistants are capable of adjusting their approach and end up either patronizing a knowledgeable customer or confusing an ignorant customer.

Bäckström and Johansson’s (2005) study clearly shows that the service experience of customers – both negative and positive – emerge from interaction or even lack of interaction with the staff. A somewhat similar conclusion can be drawn from Ryan and Rodriguez’s (2001:266) study as they find how their respondents associate shopping with ‘putting up with inept sales assistants who give either too much or not enough attention’. Perceived service quality – excellent as well as poor – from the customer’s point of view seems to derive primarily from the human interaction within the service encounter. Therefore, it is important for any service organisation to ensure that ‘the right kind of people are hired for personal-contact jobs and that they are appropriately socialized, trained and equipped to satisfy the customer expectations’ (Schneider & Bowen 1998:112). Chung and Schneider (2002:71) suggest that ‘selection practices should focus on service personality and service competencies’. Svingstedt (2005:42) who is a business economist with a past in hospitality, talks about the problems with recruitment:

In the companies I have been working we put a lot of energy into recruitment so we would get people with suitable competence and the right attitude. According to my opinion we did hire people who were both nice and polite, but at the hundred service encounter for the day the niceness and politeness was not up to standard.

The management literature on services seems convinced that some people are service minded by nature and that it is crucial to identify these people and consequently hire them. If they for some reason turn out to be a disappointment, some believe those people cheated their way into the position. A feeling of almost conspiracy is found among the managers in Wallace and de Chernatony’s (2008:157-158) study when recruitment is discussed:
Sometimes people do slip through the net for one reason or another and they’re there. [HR manager]

You have very clever people … who know what customer service oriented companies are looking for at an interview and are going to play their cards right. [Store HR manager]

You take people in good faith. You interview them. They can tell you everything you want to hear at an interview stage … you train them, they say all the right things at the beginning and then for whatever reason after a couple of weeks, they develop a different style of attitude. [Store manager]

When reading statements such as these, a picture of terrorists infiltrating service operations appears. It seems unlikely that someone would go through the trouble or be that passionate about fighting the service industry. There must be another explanation as to why employees do not behave accordingly to the rules, regulations, or demands.

When employees are not performing accordingly to some service ideal, it is most often viewed as an individual problem and not a structural problem – the employee is looked upon simply as a problem worker who is out to harm the organisation or someone who has not come to an understanding yet. Occasionally, more ‘structural’ causes such as skills and wages are mentioned in passing. An employer in Townsend’s (2004:50) study says, ‘there’s a limited number of people that are good and are willing to work for shitty pay’. A manager of a hotel chain concludes that ‘the hospitality industry isn’t really highly skilled […] they [employees] change their jobs every 5 minutes and they’ve little fear when it comes to being caught misbehaving at work’ (Harris & Ogbonna 2002:175). Service delivery that falls short for some reason or in some aspect is regarded occasionally as service sabotage. Wallace and de Chernatony (2008) identify three service sabotage types: (a) Anti-company behaviour, which primarily is caused by a perception of being treated badly, either by management or by customers. This behaviour may be expressed through work avoidance or engagement in acts of revenge; (b) Underperformance, which is connected to being indifferent and lacking commitment. Employees who under-perform are usually longing for another job and have no wish to pursue a career in services; and (c) Failure to provide service quality, sometimes due to bureaucracy. Failing to provide service quality is often a result of things out of the employee’s control as Wallace and de Chernatony (2008:156) state – ‘the system frustrates the employee who wishes to provide quality service.’

Service that is not executed to the satisfaction of the customer is sometimes labelled service failure. Even employees who are keen to provide good or excellent service sometimes fail to provide service quality:
I met this couple who at the beginning [wrongly] told me they were rather experienced skiers. So we began with some tough slopes and it didn’t go well, especially not for the woman. And I was told, believe me! They had certainly misinformed me, especially the guy who described her [the girlfriend] as a rather advanced skier and maybe I should have noticed earlier. I should have, so I was to blame too. [Tour rep/Ski instructor]

It is interesting to notice how this ski instructor takes (some of) the blame for what can be labelled service failure when it is obvious that the customers gave incorrect information. The influence of customer behaviour may in fact be a significant factor when employees are deemed to lack the right service attitude (a subject explored later in this book).

It is obviously clear that proper employee behaviour is seen from the perspective of customers, and it is also obviously clear – yet a bit concealed – that proper employee behaviour is expected to result in profit. To make employees keener to behave ‘properly’, companies could emphasise the customer as a human being and not company profit. As an illustration of this, Hochschild (1983:196) gives an example from Delta’s recurrent training classes for flight attendants who were told:

When you get mad at some guy for telling you that you owe him a smile, you’re really mad only because you’re focusing on yourself, on how you feel. Get your mind off yourself. Think about how the situation looks to him.

Although the issue of employees not performing according to employer and/or customer satisfaction has drawn academic interest, many service management researchers find it difficult imagining the possibility of employees not doing their best to provide excellent service (Harris & Ogbonna 2002). Such an opinion almost relies on a conviction that service providers see their occupation as a calling – it is enough just to serve. The opposite perspective can be found within labour process theory in which falling short in service excellence is considered natural. Workers seek autonomy; they are ‘active, creative human beings. No industrial regime can completely deny them this and survive’ (Hodson 1991:72). Labour process researchers, like Hodson, believe that whenever employees are controlled and constrained they will resist in one way or another – perhaps by service sabotage. Such a point of view derives from the structural conflict between workers and management or labour and economic capital. An employee in Harris and Ogbonna’s (2002:177) study says:

I’ve worked in some place where what you call ‘service sabotage’ is just normal and everyday occurrence – nothing unusual just lousy service and a lot of fun!
ROLE PLAY

Normann’s (1984) use of the phrase *moment of truth* to describe the encounter between service provider and customer was borrowed from a novel by Hemmigway, which refers to bullfighting. Normann’s intention of using the phrase is to catch the crucial and dramatic moment in which a service is produced and consumed (its outcome might be positive as well as negative), but it also brings to mind an association of the matador (employee) killing the bull (customer). Bullfighting is – to some – a spectacular show, and others besides Normann have used metaphors, for instance, from the theatre to describe the service encounter (e.g. Grove & Fisk 1992). Corvellec (2005:132) speculates about the authenticity aspect of this metaphor; ‘in contrast to the real theatre, acting in the service play is not supposed to look like theatre.’ The resemblance to theatre is not only highlighted in the service literature but also by a waitress in our study who says, ‘you definitely become an actress’ when she is talking about the interaction with customers. A shop assistant says ‘sometimes you have a bad day but it’s not allowed to affect your work […] in that way you become sort of an actor.’

Corvellec (2005) asserts that both employees and customers are analysed, trained, prepared, and guided into acting in a play that does not want to be recognised as a play – all for the purpose of making the service interaction as efficient as possible. In a traditional play at the theatre, the performers act from manuscripts. When this is conducted in the service setting it is routinization (Leidner 1996), which obviously has limitations regarding customers preferred service handling. There is also interactive theatre, involving the audience in various degrees, where the play’s direction and outcome may be uncertain. The actors in this line of theatre have to be perceptive and creative; reassigned to service work the employees (actors) have to be empowered. Echeverri and Edvardsson (2002:348) point out that ‘the staff ought to feel that they are empowered to act from their own intellect and judgment. To be empowered imply that employees has authority to go beyond the usual.’

It is not easy to predestine what makes a customer satisfied with the service encounter since different customers appreciate different aspects (Fuller & Smith 1996); therefore, it is necessary that employees are able to identify customer’s preferences and adjust the service performance in accordance to those preferences. According to Bettencourt and Gwinner (1996), it is essential that employees adjust their attitude, communication style, and language to match those of the customers. The adoption aspect prevails in our interviews:
If you’re skiing with a bunch of guys in their twenties, the conversation will be of a certain character. If you’re skiing with a couple in their sixties, who perhaps have gone to the university, you adjust the way you talk. You become some kind of chameleon.

[Tour rep/Ski instructor]

It is important to not upset, irritate or annoy the customer in any way. Bettencourt and Gwinner (1996) suggest that the company may capitalize on employees’ expressing the same or similar opinions and ideologies as the customer regardless of their personal opinions. Abiala and Ahrne (1995:228, writers’ translation) provide the following empirical example of such a ‘dishonest’ service performance:

One of our shop assistants describe how she in her mind silently screams ‘help’ when a customer comes out of the dressing room with a sweater the shopper sees as the perfect buy. It is the shop assistant’s obligation to make sure the customer leaves the store happy and therefore she smiles and plays along. She does not reveal her initial reaction or express her genuine opinion.

Dishonesty or perhaps social tactfulness seems to be natural when it comes to human interplay and it might even be more prevalent when people do not know each other well, which is the case in many service interactions.

[Waitress]

The dramaturgical perspective (Goffman 1959) views social interaction as role-play where all individuals stage their performances in various degrees. To act successfully on stage, preparation back stage and out of sight is usually required (Grove & Fisk 1992); Abiala and Ahrne (1995:214, writers translation) give the following ‘dramaturgical’ example of a hair dresser’s preparation and performance:

You have to recollect what brand of shampoo you sold the previous time the customer was here. They want you to remember what has been done in the past. Personally, I put all information on the computer. The customers think I am very professional, they do not understand that I go through this information just before they arrive.

The backstage area (e.g. staff room) is not only a place for preparation but also a place where supposedly employees can relax, talk undisturbed, and let off
steam. A hairdresser in Abiala’s (2000:88, *writers’ translation*) study says the following:

We’re different in the staff room. No customers are allowed there [...] It’s a place where you can say whatever you like [...] Not even friends are allowed in the staff room, because I can not come in there if a customer sits there having coffee, saying ‘oh what a bitch’ about a customer.

The staff room – or other places customers are excluded from – may be viewed as a sanctuary from the customers and the service role. In this back region, employees may have an opportunity to drop the service smile, discuss troublesome or peculiar customers, strenuous situations, support each other, or in other ways unwind.

At company X there was this punching ball on the loading dock; our boss put it there. Oh, it was so good. When you went out for a smoke, you had this sand bag to bang on. You do talk about customers who are a pain in the butt or who give you a hard time but at company X we hardly ever talked, we went out for a fight [with the punching ball] instead. Sometimes, before going home you hit so hard your fists were all red – it felt so f**king good, letting it all out. [Waitress]

If someone [a guest] continues to be nasty and unpleasant I go to the kitchen to blow off steam among friends. Then I return trying to look as happy as I can. [Waitress/bartender]

The “back room” is also a place where the employees can joke about customers and even make fun of them. Our data shows that almost half of employees occasionally make fun of customers while being in the staff room or at other sites where customers are excluded (table 23).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 23: Making fun of customers. Chi-Square: 0.004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often making fun of customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom making fun of customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never making fun of customers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along with making fun of customers, a tour rep in Abiala’s (2000:117, *writers’ translation*) study says:
We use to joke, very privately, about how our guests lock in their brain in the safe-box at Arlanda [airport]. Then they’re off for vacation and don’t think at all for two weeks. On arrival back home, they insert the brain.

A travel agent in our study provides the following story as an example of what the staff at the travel agency may joke about:

A colleague of mine had this customer who had booked this trip and he had also paid for it. For some reason he didn’t think the transaction had been done so he booked another trip and paid for it with his Visa card. He did this four times, so altogether he bought four trips the same week for the same people. Then he came in a fifth time and wanted to pay but then the sales didn’t go through. […] How stupid can you be? You get a confirmation on e-mail, booking number and the amount drawn from your account. Transaction done! You must have a low IQ if you missed the huge amount of money that’s been drawn. It’s things like that we may joke about – ‘Hello lightning! What were you thinking?’

The purpose of making fun of customers may be about retaining dignity (in a situation where customers’ behaviours and demands are perceived as stressful) as well as social bonding (with co-workers), but it may also be about ‘just having a laugh’ or winding down.

In addition, the staff room can be viewed as a place where batteries are reloaded and a place where you gather strength for another round with the customers. For some it may be stressful to keep up with the service role, and service employees seem to be very aware of the acting part of the job. Some perceive ‘themselves wearing a cloak at work; they play a role, and remove it when they leave’ (Folgero & Fjeldstad 1995:308).

Some days I feel sort of ‘shit’, just want to pull the covers over my head and never get out of bed. Still, I have to put on this fake smile, sort of becoming another person. Kind of wearing a mask or what should I say, step into a different role. [Travel agent]

In Tracy’s (2000:111) study on work at a cruise ship, one crew member says, ‘you’re performing from the minute you walk out your cabin door. You’re acting a role of chirpy, cheerful staff member out to give the passengers the feeling of being happy.’ Other researchers have detected role-play as well. Sharpe’s (2005) study on adventure guides and Guerrier’s and Adib’s (2003) study on tour reps, for instance, reveal employees’ awareness of the importance to carry out an adequate role while interacting with customers. In a similar way,
Williams (2003:546) concludes how most flight attendants adjust to the role and deliver what may be labelled the ‘flight attendant style’, which is central to the service expected from airline companies. A respondent in Folgero and Fjeldstad’s (1995:308) study says, ‘if you work in a reception you play the receptionist.’ To take on a distinct occupational role at work seems to be something ‘natural’ or almost universal – it is just something you do. In our sample, an overwhelming majority of 95 percent report that they take on a distinct occupational role at work in various degrees and act in accordance with that role when interacting with customers; as many as two out of three do so very often or even all the time (table 24). It is apparent that more women than men engage in occupational role-play.

**Table 24: Taking on a distinct role at work. Chi-Square: 0.000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often taking on a distinct role</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom taking on a distinct role</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never taking on a distinct role</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 25: Demands to be happy and cooperative. Chi-Square: 0.000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience demands to be happy and cooperative to a high degree</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience demands to be happy and cooperative to a low degree</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience no demands to be happy and cooperative</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The service role often requires an accommodating attitude, a happy mood, and a smiling face. A waitress in our study comments on this by saying, ‘you may for sure be in a grumpy mood at work but you never show that to the customer.’ A respondent with experience from both restaurants and the retail sector says there are demands to ‘always be nice and happy.’ The majority of service employees experience demands to be happy and cooperative in the service encounter to various degrees, and more women than men experience those demands to a significantly higher degree (table 25).
A respondent in Abiala’s (2000:107, *writers’ translation*) study describes service work in the following way:

> It is a fundamental principle to be polite, nice and kind towards customers without being pushy. You got to have service within yourself. To be open is probably also important, being able to talk to people. Positive thinking is central so you don’t go around being grumpy.

It is likely that socialization is a major influence on employees who take on a distinct occupational role and act in accordance with that role. Employees learn from colleagues, at least partly, what is expected behaviour and proper self-representation. Additionally, there are assumptions about different occupations within society that probably affect individuals to a certain degree. A nurse is supposed to be sympathetic, a shop assistant is supposed to be helpful, and a tourist guide is supposed to be cheerful. A respondent in Folgero and Fjeldstad’s (1995:308) study says, ‘you’re there to do a job, and what you think or feel doesn’t really mean all that much.’

The revealing of (employee) engagement in role-play hardly comes as a surprise; the dramaturgical perspective has pointed out that we all engage in role-play. To function in society there is a need to restrain certain opinions, emotions, and impulses. Such a restraint is part of people skills or social competence. Although acting or role-play is occasionally required in social interplay at large, it has been established that genuineness in the service interaction is important for customers. No one wants to be fooled and customers exposed to fake employee performances are likely to withdraw their business (Abiala & Ahrne 1995; Sanders 2005). Where to draw the line between empty courtesy phrases (‘have a nice day’), white lies (‘that tie really suits you’) and more severe deceptive customer treatment is not clear-cut. In the early eighties, the supermarket chain store *Winn-Dixie* did a courtesy campaign where sincerity was focused – ‘if the cashier doesn’t come up with a friendly greeting and a sincere thank you, the customer is supposed to get a dollar’ (Hochschild 1983:149). Because of the importance of employee sincerity, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) suggest that organisations – besides trying to identify and hire people who are talented in this area – ought to provide additional training for frontline staff in becoming, or at least appearing, authentic. Employee conduct is crucial for many service organisations; Zeithaml et al. (1990:10) talk about the importance of ‘a genuinely warm greeting from a service provider [and] the graceful handling of a special request’. There is no doubt that management want, and sometimes demand, employees to share company goals, visions,
values and so forth because loyal and committed employees are prepared to go to any lengths to do a good job. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999:75) conclude, ‘it is management that has the power and discretion to define behaviour as acceptable or unacceptable’. Undesired employee behaviour has become known as organisational misbehaviour or even the dark side of organisational behaviour including ‘everything employees do, think, and are that managers do not want them to do, think, and be’ (Karlsson 2008:132).

The demand on employees to be sincere and genuine does not apply, however, to any opinions, behaviours, or actions that would be perceived (by customers) in a negative way. To lie is obviously the opposite of being sincere and although it might come as a surprise to some managers and scholars with a managerial perspective, employees sometimes actually lie right to the customers’ face. An employee may untruthfully (a) tell a customer that an item, a specific model or a particular size is sold out; (b) say that he or she will make inquiries regarding a customer matter; (c) claim that a particular customer request is not possible to carry out; (d) give customers incorrect information; or (e) hold back expertise and capability.

I might say we’re out of a certain size although I haven’t checked the stock-room.
[Shop assistant]

Our sample shows that a third of service employees sometimes lie to customers to avoid additional workload and nearly half of male employees engage in untruthful behaviour (table 26).

Table 26: Lying to customers to avoid additional workload. Chi-Square: 0.000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often lying to customers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom lying to customers</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never lying to customers</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A respondent in our study says it is not unusual to deny a customer request:

Many times you simply don’t have any interest in doing it or you’re tired and prefer to have a cup of coffee or a cigarette, sorry! And in some way it is a scandal. The guest doesn’t get what he or she wants just because someone is in the mood for coffee or wants a cigarette. It’s like ‘I don’t give a damn about you’. [Waitress]
This comment clearly shows the conflict that may arise from customer demands and employees’ personal needs. Our study reveals that 40 percent of service providers claim that sometimes or even all the time their own personal well-being takes precedence over customer satisfaction. A shop assistant says, ‘Customer wishes and demands can never be so important that they ultimately affect me in any personal way.’

The lying part in customer interaction is, however, a two-edged sword. It is okay, and sometimes even preferable, if employees are a bit reckless with the truth as long as the customer is happy and satisfied, or the company makes money.

A lot of times you're not honest to the guests. For example, say tonight’s dish is fillet of pork – which is not my favourite – and this is what we're supposed to flog tonight. Then I might say to the guests ‘oh, it’s really good, you're in for a real treat if you order the pork file’ when I actually [disgusted] think ‘oh bloody hell, are you so stupid that you'll choose this?’ sort of. [Waitress]

Most customers want to hear that I have been there [at a particular place/resort] personally, knowing the hotel is good. So usually I say I’ve been there on a study tour or I say ‘I’ve been there on holiday myself and it was excellent. It's right at the beach, great hotel.' Then they say ‘if that’s so, we'll take it.’ Sometimes I twist the truth a bit, knowing a colleague who's been there and who told me about the place. I have a lot of details plus I have read the catalogue, so I might tell them ‘I was there in May last year, it was excellent.’ [Travel agent]

This travel agent underlines the danger of lies that are easy to detect because the customer will return in anger with complaints and the company might suffer financially.

I had a colleague who hadn’t been to Thailand trying to sell a trip to Thailand and she had heard us talking. The customer was going to Bangkok and then to Hua Hin by bus. It’s a long way to Hua Hin from Bangkok and the customer was concerned for their little children. She [the colleague] said ‘no, it’s not that far, it will take 15 or 20 minutes.’ I had to interrupt because I felt ‘this will not end well.’ It takes about 3 ½ hour to get to Hua Hin. They’d be furious. You know, children being on a plane for 12 hours to get to Thailand and then spending 3 ½ hour on a bus to get to the hotel. [Travel agent]

Bettencourt and Gwinner (1996) advocate, as mentioned earlier, that employees should reflect the opinions, interests, and ideologies of customers regardless of personal feelings and preferences. Such obligation is connected to emotions, which are discussed more deeply in the following section.
EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Rafaeli and Worline (2001:96) claim that ‘we are predisposed to thinking of emotions as our own, perhaps the most intimate parts of us, [nevertheless] our emotions are inextricably bound up with other people and our participation in our social worlds’. Emotions in the workplace are not viewed as private or personal as Leidner (1996:30) establishes that ‘employers often feel entitled to extend their control efforts to more and more aspects of workers’ selves. Workers’ […] feelings, thoughts, and attitudes may all be treated by employers as legitimate targets of intervention’. Martin (1999:113) makes a distinction between feeling rules and display rules and concludes that ‘feeling rules are norms regarding what emotions should be experienced by workers. In contrast, display rules are norms guiding which emotions ought to be publicly expressed and how’. According to Hochschild (1983:57), feeling rules are about the pinch between what I do feel and what I should feel. An example of how feeling rules and display rules may merge is given by Zeithaml et al. (1990:5) when they suggest that ‘people in service work need a vision in which they can believe, an achievement culture that challenges them to be the best they can be’. It is about experiencing the right emotions and displaying and acting on those emotions in a correct way. Management wants control over work and because of the importance of emotions for many (service) organisation’s existence and success, ‘managerial efforts are invested in manipulating emotion in multiple organizational areas’ (Rafaeli & Worline 2001:97).

A waitress in our study says she is definitely hiding genuine emotions when encountering customers and when asked what emotions she conceals she says ‘well… loathe, disgust, irritation, anger, aversion, fatigue.’ Another respondent in the restaurant business says how she is herself at work ‘although a little more and a little too much’ and she continues:

Imagine how stressful it would be hanging with such a person – I would die. When coming into the kitchen after being out in the restaurant smiling, laughing, and chatting I sometimes feel disgusted: ‘What am I doing? Why am I so annoying? But inside I feel [what is expected of me] so I continue to laugh and joke although I would really like to give them [customers] the finger saying ‘sit on this and spin for a while’ and then walk out. That’s what I would like to do. [Waitress/bartender]

Emotions are a visible part of many peoples’ jobs and organisations require the use of employees’ emotions to compete (Rafaeli & Worline 2001). Implicitly or explicitly, organisations may persuade ‘employees to accommodate themselves to the desired persona’ (Leidner 1996:36). Especially in many services,
employees are expected to draw on their emotions in order to create the 'right' mood in the service interaction – almost exclusively for economic reasons. Flight attendants, for example, are supposed to convey a feeling of security but above all a feeling of delight even if the passengers are demanding, rude or drunk. Other examples are undertakers who are supposed to 'take part' in the grieving even though they do not know the deceased, and beauticians who must pamper the customer both physically and emotionally. These examples may be linked to what Rafaeli and Worline (2001) call, organised emotions. It is important for many firms and organisations to be customer focused and thus employees are encouraged to 'put themselves in their customers' shoes, and offer them the sort of service they themselves would ideally like to receive' (Du Gay 1996:79).

Emotions help promote organisational goals (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987), and emotional labour is about inducing or suppressing feelings in order to produce a certain state of mind in others (Hochschild 1983), and thus emotional labour is commodification of feelings (Sharpe 2005). According to Williams’ (2003) study, more women than men find emotional labour demanding. One explanation would be that stereotypical feminine skills – which are included in many types of settings where emotional labour comes into play – are believed to be natural for women to possess and to express. It is more common for women than men to have a traditional service occupation such as flight attendant, waitress, or receptionist (Hochschild 1983). Customers, men as well as women, expect female service workers to be more helpful than male service workers (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2003).

Sometimes, emotive dissonance (Hochschild 1983) occurs in terms of the employee's expected and experienced emotions. Emotive dissonance means not feeling the way a situation requires, whether the requests come from social or cultural values at large, from customers' expectations, or from management's rules and regulations. When employees are incapable of genuine correspondence to certain emotional demands, they usually exhibit one of two types of strategies: surface acting or deep acting. Surface acting refers to putting on a show by simply displaying expected emotions without actually feeling them (acting as if...) while deep acting refers to true emotional changes. The former can be accomplished by the use of a smile to 'show' that the serving part is not just a job (Hall 1993) or a rehearsed phrase of politeness (Leidner 1996), while the latter is a process where genuine emotions are conjured. Putting oneself in another's shoes is one way to try to make an emotional change.

Morris and Feldman (1996:987) define emotional labour as 'the effort, planning, and control needed to express organisationally desired emotion
during interpersonal transaction.’ In some settings and situations, however, desired emotions are genuinely felt by workers. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993:94), for example, note that ‘a nurse who feels sympathy at the sight of an injured child has no need to act’. Although there might be congruence between expected emotion and genuinely felt emotion, Morris and Feldman (1996:988) claim that the employee ‘will still have to exert some effort to ensure that what is felt will be displayed in organisationally appropriate ways’. Guerrier’s and Adib’s (2003:1407) holiday resort study support this as they find that although the tour reps ‘work persona’ and their ‘authentic persona’ somewhat overlap, they do manufacture a certain ‘personality for the benefit of the holiday makers’. One of the tour reps says ‘you have got to be good fun, you know you have got to look happy as a tour rep’ (Guerrier & Adib 2000:1406). It seems that service providers are eager to point out that they do not fabricate a completely different service personality:

Generally, I think I'm being myself but of course I adjust a bit. [Shop assistant]

As a person I'm happy and obliging, I'm happy by nature. [House salesman]

I'm very open and social and happy at work. I'm the same way in private. [Travel agent]

I am open and social. I like to chat and meet people in my spare time too. The difference in personality [on the job versus the free time] may be that I take on a selling role at work. [Shop assistant]

The importance of appearance is exposed further when a cruise staff member in Tracy’s (2000:91) study concludes that ‘our job is our personality.’ The relationship between feeling rules (proper emotions), display rules (proper expression of emotions), surface acting (fake performance of emotions), deep acting (genuine performance of emotions) and personality may be complex. Our study shows that it is common among service employees to conceal their true emotion in the service encounter and there is in fact no difference between men and women in this area (table 27).
Table 27: Hiding genuine emotions in the service encounter. Chi-Square: 0.893

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never hiding genuine emotions in the service encounter</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom hiding genuine emotions in the service encounter</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often hiding genuine emotions in the service encounter</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A shop assistant in our study says when a family with kids comes into the store that ‘you may need to cuddle with the kids although you hate children.’ A waitress/bartender, who hates when customers get physical, nevertheless feels the need sometimes to go along with the customer’s wish for physical contact:

> The worst thing I know is when they touch me. […] If it’s a regular I might feel (obliged to) but I become stiff as a stick, possible smile a little. […] I don’t like it at all but on the other hand, if George 65 years old wants to thank me for a pleasant evening [by giving me a hug] I feel rotten, I don’t have to… it becomes more of a pat on the back as I try to keep away. [Waitress/bartender]

On the contrary, a house salesman claims he rarely hides his genuine emotions: ‘If I’m irritated at a customer I may not show it the first time but I will the next time. I will explain my view on the situation.’

Emotional labour can be enjoyable and satisfying but also stressful and costly. Williams (2003:544) concludes that ‘there is an ongoing dynamic between the enjoyable and satisfying features of service work and some of its unsavoury and unsafe aspects.’ Hochschild (1983) suggests that in the long-run emotional labour may lead to self-alienation because the employee may lose track of her or his own personal emotions. Many service occupations and contexts involve a great amount of role performance, which after a while tends to cause difficulties in deciding whether emotions come from within (genuinely emotions) or if they originate from the work role (fabricated emotions). Such a situation may have arisen for a shop assistant in Abiala’s (2000:133, writers’ translation) study who says:

> My husband says I’m different. I don’t know what it is. Sometimes he thinks I’m taking my job with me home. Maybe it’s about attitudes and stuff. It happens quite often that he says ‘now it’s not a customer you’re dealing with’.

How the manufactured and the fabricated emotions blur with reality is revealed when a travel agent talks about sales tactics:
I always refer to my own experiences if I’ve been there, and if I haven’t I refer to a colleague who has been. But sometimes I tell them [customers] I’ve been there although I have not. I have told that story so many times I hardly know myself if I’ve been there or if it was someone else.

Playing a role and producing a certain atmosphere with the help of emotions may lead to problems other than deciding which emotions are true and which are false. Although Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) question the notion that service work automatically involves emotive dissonance, that is, that there is a natural conflict between the service role and the employee’s personality, there are times when the service role might be in conflict with the employee’s personal feelings. For example, when a certain required ‘work persona’ causes, from the employee’s perspective, undesired customer behaviour (e.g. sexual advances, sexual harassment, or immense service demands), role stress occurs (Fine et al. 1994). Role stress, or role conflict, may be seen as a modification of emotive dissonance. To reprimand or tell off a customer is considered bad service and a woman in the hospitality sector says, ‘I don’t want to spoil his party, and not the least, he’s a guest’ (Folgero & Fjeldstad 1995:307). On the contrary, some service providers are not afraid of confronting customers who behave improperly; a waitress in our study talks about sexual harassment:

I almost long for a real dispute so I have a reason to have that customer removed from the table, to have him make a fool of himself in front of his colleagues. I don’t back down if he starts to argue. I try to handle it as professionally as possible but still make sure he makes a fool of himself. I ask ‘What did you just do?’ and he goes ‘What? I don’t understand.’ Sometimes people are so bloody stupid I feel sorry for them. So, I ask again and again and finally he says ‘I did this’ [showing with the hand] and I reply ‘Use words, tell me what you did.’ [and he says]:
- Yes, I touched your butt
- Where did you touch me?
- I touched your butt
- Why? What right do you have touching my butt? It’s my butt! I’m here to serve you drinks, does that give you the right to touch my butt?

Most often, they’re taken by surprise; they are not prepared for a discussion. […] And I talk loud to attract attention [among the other guests], ‘oh, something’s going on’. I don’t have to worry about nobody hearing because they all heard it.

Obviously, employees sometimes encounter customers they do not like and on such occasions, it is difficult to maintain a service attitude (Sharpe 2005). When it comes to encountering undesired customers, in a broad sense, our results reveal that on occasion 84 percent get annoyed or irritated at customers; 76 percent get fed up with customers; and 69 percent encounter customers they do not want to serve or assist. It is important to note that these feelings are not
experienced on a daily basis for the vast majority, but there is a significant linear connection between employees’ perception of customers and their ambition to provide good/excellent service. For whatever reason, the more customers cause negative feelings in employees, the less ambition employees have to provide service beyond customer expectations. A shop assistant says that she is not keen on doing anything out of the ordinary for rude or angry customers. A travel agent admits to sometimes encountering customers she does not like and to ‘scare them off’ she gives them a much higher price than listed:

If I encounter some bloody problem customer who just makes a fuss, I may say it costs [three times more] than it actually does, and he will probably turn down the offer. If he actually says yes then f**k I have to do it [booking a trip] anyway.

The management literature on services emphasises how important the customers’ perception of the whole service experience is when it comes to running a service operation successfully, and how employees providing the service are a part of customer scrutinization (e.g. Echeverri & Edvardsson 2002). It is usually up to employees to arrange or fix the service encounter to the satisfaction of customers. Generally, the customer is left out of discussions for creating a successful service encounter. There is obviously a lack of research interest in the customer’s contribution to the service outcome.

Gremler and Gwinner (2000) discuss how customer satisfaction increases, however, when there is rapport between the employee and the customer. Rapport that consists of (a) enjoyable interaction and (b) personal connection (Gremler & Gwinner 2000), can be defined in terms of ‘personal chemistry’ or what happens when people ‘click’ with each other. Gremler and Gwinner (2000:90) provide the following customer comments as a sign of rapport between customers and employees:

He [hairstylist] does a good job and is likable. He tells jokes and asks about my family and my work. We both play bridge, so we’ll talk about that. So, we have a nice conversation while he is cutting my hair. He’s real personable and has an interesting personality.

Larry [automobile repair serviceman] at K-Mart has a great personality. He always seems to be positive and in a good mood. He’s easy to deal with. Even if he’s busy, he takes time to spend a little time with me, talk with me, and ask me how things are.

These quotations show a focus on what the employee does for the customer and how it is the customers’ concerns and affairs that is the centre of attention. The emergence of genuine rapport should be a question of give-and-take as
well as shared enjoyment and mutual personal connection, so one might wonder if there actually is rapport or simply strategic and manipulative employee behaviour disguised as rapport. A tour rep in Guerrier and Adib’s (2003:1407) study says:

I try not to talk about myself too much with them [guests] ‘cause you know they don’t want to hear me talk about myself. I ask them a lot about them, where they come from, how long they are here for, you know, what do they do back home? And um, they love it, they think ‘great yeah!’

A similar description is found in Åberg’s (2007:155) study on customer interaction in the insurance business where an employee says, ‘they [customers] love to talk about themselves’. To relate conversation to the customer as an individual is a tactic to achieve commercial goals but the customer does not spot this sale-strategy and to them the employee is just being nice (Åberg 2007). A shop assistant in our study talks about the company’s ‘sales stages’ including becoming friends with the customer, and he gives a concrete example of how this can be done:

Many times I begin by telling something that has happened to me that particular day; they think it’s funny and then they tell me their story. For example, when it got really cold some time ago and I had to scrape the windows [of the car, free from ice] I said ‘Oh God, I had to scrape the windows’ and then he may say ‘I know, I slipped the other day’ and suddenly you have gotten close to this person.

Fuller and Smith (1996) establish that for some customers service quality is achieved when there is opportunity for small talk with the staff. A house salesman in our study has experienced customers who address subjects besides the actual service transaction and he says:

If they [customers] talk about their private stuff, it goes in one ear and out the other. It’s not any of my business, and it has nothing to do with the sale.

A somewhat similar point of view is expressed by a travel agent who comes across customers entering the agency without any intension of booking a trip:

Often it is really know-it-all types who come in just to talk and show how much they know. Usually it’s people who perhaps are lonely and [come here] just to have someone to talk to. Certainly, those customers exist in every line of business. [...] I don’t feel motivated to show my knowledge or to try to find a suitable trip or destination for these customers because I know from the beginning there will be no sale. It’s like ‘yeah, yeah, take a catalogue, bye, bye.’ It’s no positive atmosphere, it’s not. Actually, I just want to get rid of them.
Although some service providers may dislike and manage to avoid customers’ private matters, Abiala (2000:112, *writers’ translation*) reveals that service workers sometimes function as therapists:

If a customer has some kind of problem and don’t know how to handle it, you get him in a position where he can recover and thinks things through. To have a moment’s peace and the opportunity to talk to someone. It’s like psychology. Like being a midwife, psychologist, brother, sister, mother or father. [Server]

It is very social too. A lot of people shop here because they want to talk to someone. I’m there anyway to help them. Sometimes you have the time to talk, other times you don’t. You don’t say to a customer ‘I don’t have time for you’. I have to show it in other ways: either with body language or someone else comes along and interrupts. [Shop assistant]

The therapeutic side of service work is noticeable in our study as well.

I can imagine me being some sort of sanctuary to them [customers] because they don’t know me. They can tell me stuff, knowing it is safe with me. It doesn’t affect them at all because I don’t know them or their everyday lives. [Tour rep]

Other respondents experience that customers get personal and private too:

It’s probably because they trust me in some way; perhaps I’m neutral to them. [...] It feels both good and weird, I would say. Some are very quick telling me personal stuff and I might feel a bit uncomfortable, but I guess it’s something you have to accept – it comes with the job. [Shop assistant]

[They] tell about their families, if they are ill, if they are happy, if something has happened in their lives during the week… You might get to hear anything, just anything I don’t want to hear all the things they tell me. [Waitress/bartender]

Guerrier and Adib (2003:1408) conclude that ‘befriending’ (rapport?) sometimes is a part of an ‘act’ with the purpose of facilitating customer interaction from the employee’s perspective. One tour rep talks about certain customers as ‘a group of dickheads’ who he pretends to be friends with because then they are easier to handle. It is obviously clear that this particular tour rep does not experience rapport but it is indeed unclear how the so-called ‘dickheads’ perceive the situation. Gremler and Gwinner (2000) focus primarily on the employee part of creating rapport but since it is supposedly a two-way phenomenon, the customer part would be equally important. The customers’ behaviours and interest in the employees as persons are certainly an equivalent factor for rapport. A house salesman in our study has actually become friends with some customers and his narrative illustrates rapport:
I’ve made friends. Some I hunt with right now. They have invited me on hunting trips. [...] It starts with the house sale, and then you might discover having some interests in common, being alike and enjoy spending time together. If I don’t like someone for real, I would turn down the invitation. I really would. So it’s nothing forced. It’s mutual.

When discussing what it is that makes people ‘click’, a travel agent says, ‘Well, I suppose it’s when you are alike on a personal level. A customer who’s a bit like me, a little facetious, someone who’s easy to talk to. But it has not happened that many times.’ Likeable customers seem to get more attention or better service than others, although employees might have mixed feelings about this situation.

Unfortunately that’s the case: I’m more concerned about pleasant customers whom I connect with. When I worked in X we sometimes got good prices on hockey games and I thought about who I should take along, who had ‘earned’ this opportunity? I’m not choosing an unpleasant customer. I choose someone I connected with. [Tour rep]

The respondents in our study were asked to choose from two opposite statements: (a) I identify with the customers and experience affinity with them. They seem to be much like me, and (b) I have difficulties identifying with the customers and I experience no affinity with them (table 28 and 29). First, our results indicate that only a minority of service employees routinely encounter customers with whom they feel no identification or affinity. It seems that approximately half of service employees identify with customers and experience affinity with them most of the time or to a high degree while the other half’s experiences are more diverse. The latter seem to encounter customers whom they identify with as well as customers they do not identify with, which in itself is not an earth-shattering finding.

Table 28: Level of agreement to the statement: ‘I identify with the customers and experience affinity with them. They seem to be much like me.’ Chi-Square: 0.109

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do not experience any identification and affinity with customers</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience some identification and affinity with customers</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience great identification and affinity with customers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 29: Level of agreement to the statement: 'I have difficulties identifying with the customers and I experience no affinity with them.' Chi-Square: 0.799

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No difficulties identifying with customers</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some difficulties identifying with customers</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great difficulties identifying with customers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show that the image of the organisation plays a more significant role for the degree of identification and affinity with customers (table 30).

Table 30: Identification and affinity with customers linked to organisational image. Chi Square: 0.066

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ordinary image</th>
<th>Exclusive image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not experience any identification and affinity with customers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience some identification and affinity with customers</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience great identification and affinity with customers</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a study of adventure guides, Sharpe (2005) found that some guides have no problem creating the right emotional atmosphere because of a fit between organisational/situational demands and personality, while others have to fight to obtain and display desirable emotions. One adventure guide says (Sharpe 2005:39):

> For me, doing a trip is almost like putting on a show and keeping that attitude is tough [...] It takes an extra effort for me to be that person.

Wharton and Erickson (1993) divide emotional display into three categories: positive, neutral, and negative. The display of positive emotions may be salient in traditional service occupations such as retail, food, and recreation; Morris and Feldman (1996:993) state that ‘for example, counter workers at fast-food restaurants and convenience store workers frequently must express desired positive emotions’. Neutral emotions are linked more to professionalism as Wharton and Erickson (1993:467) conclude that ‘emotional masking is especially emphasised in accounts of middle management and most professions’. Medical students, for instance, must learn how to be ‘detached
concerned’ (Lief & Fox 1963), which is believed to be proper conduct for physicians. The ideal of professionalism has spread to non-professionals within the service sector as well. Adventure guides, for example, are ‘expected to suppress emotions such as fear and anxiety’ (Sharpe 2005:41) and employees in the hospitality business are considered professional if they overlook or silently accept bad customer behaviour, such as sexual harassment (Folgero & Fjeldstad 1995). The topic of professionalism is recurrent in our interviews and a common theme is not to show genuine emotions:

Some days you don’t feel like being nice but you learn rather quickly to be professional [italics added]. In my occupation, you’re supposed to be happy, open, and nice so of course I sometimes put on a mask. [Tour rep]

The occurrence of and the need for negative emotions (e.g. irritation, hostility, anger) is not commonly highlighted in the pro management literature but is observed by writers such as Hochschild (1983); Sutton (1991); Wharton & Erickson (1993); and Morris & Feldman (1996). Bill collectors and bouncers are examples of occupations in which hostility and anger (negative emotion) are supposed to be displayed in various degrees. A bill collector in Hochschild’s (1983) study says:

My boss comes into my office and says, ‘Can’t you get madder than that?’ ‘Create alarm!’ – that’s what my boss says. […] He says, ‘Can’t you be a man?’

Some employees may have to display a variety of emotions (positive, neutral, and negative) in their daily work (Wichroski 1994). The adventure guides in Sharpe’s (2005) study are expected to signal that they have the situation under control – calmness instead of anxiety and bravery instead of fear – but they are also expected to show emotions of happiness and enjoyment.

Although there are different appropriate emotions in different service settings and situations, the smile may be looked upon as a universal display of desired emotion in service; ‘The central feature of giving friendly service is learning to smile regardless of your emotional state or how others treat you’ (Hall 1993:460). Employers are looking for ‘smiling faces’ (Steinberg & Figart 1999) and the smile is often considered to be the employee’s best asset (Hochschild 1983).

Feelings of emotional authenticity is important for customers (Arnould & Price 1993; Sharma & Black 2001; Sharpe 2005) and to create genuine emotions in the aviation business, flight attendants have been asked by management to think of unknown passengers as friends or personal guests in their own living
room (Hochschild 1983). Such a request has two purposes: a) to evoke the ‘proper’ feelings towards passengers; and b) to ensure that the flight attendants try their best to make the flight as pleasant as possible for the passengers. With reference to a positive service encounter, a customer in Bäckström and Johansson’s (2005:177) study says, ‘the staff was genuinely nice, not in a false way’, which implies that just being nice is not enough - niceness has to be genuine. Even personnel may think that genuineness is important when interacting with customers. A flight attendant in Hochschild’s (1983:108) study says:

I worked with one flight attendant who put on a fake voice. On the plane she raised her voice about four octaves and put a lot of sugar and spice into it [...] I watched the passengers wince. What the passengers want is real people.

The service performance is sometimes an act as employees struggle to be ‘genuine’ although they personally may have no real genuine interest in the customer or they may even dislike the customer (Sharpe 2005). At the same time, the emotional aspect itself has been found to be a cause for employee satisfaction (Sharma and Black 2001; Korczynski 2003). A travel agent in our study says she experiences joy when customers come into the travel agency after their holiday to tell about the great trip they had. On occasion, she has been given flowers as a sign of appreciation and customers have sent her postcards.

**AESTHETIC LABOUR**

As individuals, we have a tendency to spontaneously categorise people on the basis of visual features and ‘physical appearance and gender are the two most accessible pieces of information we have about each other in ordinary social interaction’ (Schulman & Hoskins 1986:141). People make up their mind about others quickly by judging faces (Bar et al. 2006) and first impressions have a tendency to last (Rabin & Schrag 1999). Facial features are believed to be connected to personality traits and it takes less than a second to make judgments about attractiveness, likeability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness (Willis & Todorov 2006).

Physical looks including facial appearance effect social outcome in almost every domain of life (Willis & Todorov 2006) and throughout history physical
attractiveness has been an attribute of value to mankind (Bloch & Richins 1992). Tedeschi et al. (1985) state that people have a tendency to listen more carefully, experience greater trust and be more influenced by the words of attractive people and ‘decades of research have confirmed that physical attractiveness is positively related to social power, self-esteem, and the receipt of positive responses from others’ (Bloch & Richins 1992:3). One might say that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ but there seems to be a common understanding about who is good looking and who is not. ‘For example, respondents ranging in age from 7 to 50 who were asked to rank the appearance of people depicted in photographs showed very high correlations in their rankings’ (Hamermesh & Biddle 1994:1175).

The concept of ‘aesthetic labour’ may be viewed as a new phenomenon but the fact that physical appearance influences one’s opportunities at work is not new. Stryker (1953) revealed more than 50 years ago that people had been excluded from jobs as managers because of ‘wide teeth’ and ‘protruding ears’. In an experimental study where the respondents were both inexperienced students and experienced HR professionals, Jawahar and Mattson (2005:571) found that ‘attractive applicants are preferred over less attractive applicants’. According to Hamermesh and Biddle (1994:1174), ‘plain people earn less than average-looking people, who earn less than the good-looking’. A study on tip earnings by Lynn and Simons (2000) shows that attractive waitresses are tipped better than less attractive waitresses but attractiveness is not connected to tip earnings for waiters (men). Lynn and Simons (2000:250) submit two possible explanations for this finding: (a) there is a higher societal value placed on physical attractiveness for females than for men; and (b) male patron’s tipping behaviour is influenced more strongly by their sexual response to opposite gender servers. In an experimental study, Mobius and Rosenblat (2006:229) conclude that ‘physical attractiveness does not raise actual productivity. Beauty, however, raises both the worker’s and the employer’s productivity estimates and they conclude that ‘physically attractive workers are substantially more confident’ (Mobius & Rosenblat 2006:230). There is no doubt that good looks bring about a set of positive aspects for physically attractive people, which also can be profitable for employers.

In services, numerous stimuli potentially affect customers and their satisfaction with the service experience (Herrington & Capella 1996); the employee’s appearance is one such stimuli. Front-line employees play a significant role for customers and their evaluation of the service provided (Gowan et al. 2001). Warhurst et al. (2000:4) suggest that many employers
prefer personnel who ‘appeal to the senses of customers, most obviously in a visual or aural way.’ One obvious reason for hiring good-looking individuals in services is linked to the notion that customers prefer encounters with attractive people and thus attractiveness is good for business (Hamermesh & Biddle 1994). Similar to the way Löfgren (2006) suggests that the packaging of goods (e.g. the carton or the box) is a product-related attribute that affects the customer’s experience of the product, the physical appearance of an employee is a service-related attribute with the potential to affect the customer’s experience of the service. A shop assistant in our study says, ‘Customers are drawn towards employees who are good looking. It’s like that in some sick way; you notice that when working in this line of business.’ Additionally, good looks are ‘associated with more frequent social interaction attempts’ (Adams & Read 1983:155) and in a service context where social interaction is fundamental there is no disadvantage to have attractive staff. Service providers are well aware of the probable relation between good looks and profit; a tour rep says, ‘A beautiful girl will attract more customers and hopefully it will result in more sales’, and a shop assistant says, ‘I’m convinced that it’s profitable to have good looking employees.’

In some settings, physical attractiveness is more or less a requirement for the job (Guerrier & Adib 2003); by using phrases in job advertisements such as ‘smart appearance’ and ‘very well presented’, companies try to filter out ‘inappropriate’ people and many firms ask applicants to enclose a picture of themselves with their application (Warhurst et al. 2000). In terms of physical appearance, one tour rep in Guerrier and Adib’s (2003:1405) study says, ‘none of us are Claudia Schiffer [world famous model], but I mean there are some very pretty reps, there are some very good-looking reps. I have never yet seen a butt-ugly rep’. A former tour rep, now working in recruitment, says, ‘The applicant does not need to be gorgeous, but you have to like the appearance. I can not go for a person who wins in the long run; the contact with guests is rather short. It has to be a person I immediately like’ (Abiala 2000:48, writers’ translation). One respondent who works at a restaurant was present one time her employer went through applications, and she says:

They [employers] don’t even read the applications I’ll tell you, they just look at the picture. The attractive end up in one pile and the plain end up in another pile. Those the bosses think are ugly go straight into the garbage bin. No one even checks how they… Sure, people at restaurant X look rather so-so but it has a lot to do with connections and everything. With just an application, sorry, I think it’s really difficult to get a job if you’re not photogenic. [Waitress]
In a study by Nickson et al. (2005), only three percent of employers say they use photographs as part of the selection process while almost one out of four employees claim they were asked to provide a photograph when applying for a job. It would be politically incorrect as well as unprofessional to say that recruitment and selection is based primarily or at least partially on applicants’ physical looks, which might explain the difference between employers’ testimony and employees’ experience. In many services, however, looks may be far more important to employers than technical skills since the latter is believed to be easy to obtain with on-the-job training (Warhurst et al. 2000). One of our respondent’s believes that in the hospitality industry it is enough to be good looking and that there are no other demands as she says, ‘otherwise there would not be this many idiots in the business.’

Our study shows that 37 percent of service employees believe to some extent that their physical appearance (looks) was a contributing factor when they were hired. This result indicates that people are aware of aesthetic demands in the service sector and that they affect them personally. It is interesting to note that lower educated employees are more convinced that their physical appearance was a factor of importance when they were hired. There are at least two possible explanations for this: a) lack of education can be compensated by good looks, and/or b) lower educated individuals seek jobs where there are less educational requirements. In support of this, Hamermesh and Biddle (1993:1192) conclude that there is ‘some evidence that the labor market sorts the best-looking people into occupations where their looks are productive’. A female manager at The Union Bar & Grill says, ‘it’s always good to have somebody good looking behind the bar’ and her experience is that more women than men try to look attractive (The Post, November 3, 2006).

Physical appearance may be the most obvious criterion when aesthetic labour is discussed and although it usually encompasses ‘natural beauty’, it is also about looking presentable in terms of the company’s line of business and its image. Aesthetic requirements for working in a tattoo shop, for example, are most certainly different from the requirements in a high fashion store. Warhurst and Nickson (2001) use the phrase ‘looking good, sounding right’, which attempts to capture the visual and auditive aspects service firms find crucial when hiring personnel. Employees seem aware of these aspects too and not just when applying for a job:

I’m 6 foot 3. I’m often taller than everyone else so I use to crouch a bit and lower my voice so I won’t sound that blunt or rough. [Shop assistant]
Pettinger (2004) concludes that workers’ bodies, including what they wear, are part of what companies want to communicate to customers. A house salesman who is his own boss says:

I dress in accordance with the customer. If I know the customer is a snob I make sure to wear a tie, otherwise I just wear a shirt and a sweater. When I’m out on a construction site I will not wear a jacket and tie. It may be misinterpreted by the builders.

Our study reveals that 60 percent of service employees experience formal (40%) or informal (20%) demands on how to dress at work. Customers do scrutinize employees and first impressions are important, as a tour rep in Abiala’s (2000:113, writers’ translation) study has experienced:

First impression, everyone gets irritated at different things. It could be that you’re wearing too much trinkets; your ponytail is wrong; your hair is in your eyes. You address someone ‘sir’ or you address someone ‘you’. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.

Sometimes the customers are in fact a (married) couple, which may complicate the aesthetic performance; a house salesman comments on the dressing issue in the following way:

If a female house salesperson would wear a short skirt maybe he [the husband] would like it but not she [the wife]. I don’t think you should dress that way.

Employees must execute an aesthetically pleasing performance (Hamermesh & Biddle 1994) and it is not unusual to have company policies regarding the physical appearance of employees. At Harrah’s Casino, for example, female bartenders are required to wear make-up, lip colour, and nail polish and male bartenders are forbidden to have long hair, make-up or nail polish (King et al. 2006). Such a policy corresponds to Wellington and Bryson’s (2001) conclusion that many employers in services make up their personnel so they match a stereotypical heterosexual image. Service providers’ control over employees’ physical appearance may include directions and measures regarding clothes, weight, figure, teeth, hair length and haircuts, make-up, jewellery, fingernail length and colour, tattoos, and even proper colour of underwear (Hochschild 1983; Wolf 1990; Leidner 1996; King et al. 2006).
If wearing earrings, you’re not allowed big ones; they have to be discrete earrings. You’re not allowed more than one ring on each finger and nail polish must be neat and neutral, not red or pink. No visible tattoos are allowed and you have to wear pumps and not mix the uniform with your private clothes. [Travel agent]

Guys have to trim their beard, try to cover up tattoos, and not have your face full of piercings. [Tour rep]

We’re not allowed visual tattoos or piercings and of course we’re supposed to have a neat physical appearance. [Shop assistant]

Although most policies are about employees giving a decent impression, there are exceptions. In an article in *The Post* (November 3, 2006), a female bartender tells about the owner of the bar encouraging female bartenders to dress provocatively since it is believed to be good for business. Requirements to look attractive is expected in many service settings; a 40 year-old married female flight attendant says, ‘I get the feeling the majority feel you should be blonde, 21, have an hour glass figure and enjoy being servile to them’ (Williams 2003:1540).

If human aesthetics is a politically incorrect demand on employees and looked upon as a dubious job requirement, personality is not. A personnel manager of a boutique hotel commented on the recruit process in the following way: ‘We wanted people that had the personality more than the skills because we felt we could train people to do the job’ (Warhurst et al. 2000:12). Our empirical material reveals that 98 percent of respondents believe that their personality was a contributing factor when they were hired and as many as three out of four service employees think their personality had a major impact on their employer’s decision to hire them. It would probably be wrong to say that personality and physical appearance are the same, but the two are intertwined. Hochschild (1983), Warhurst et al. (2000), and Guerrier and Adib (2003), for example, discuss personality and physical appearance alternately.

### CHARM, FLIRTATION, AND SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION

The service encounter is usually an encounter among individuals and since human interaction is dynamic in nature, it is difficult to predict its outcome. In most services, communication (people talking to each other and body language) is a major part or at least a major characteristic in handling a situation or an errand. To propose that service work encompasses demands on employees to
be nice and friendly is not an earth shattering statement, but where is the line drawn between being friendly, charming and even flirtatious? Abbey (1987:193) concludes that a correct interpretation of certain behaviour is not always easy because of ambiguous meaning:

Smiling may be used to convey friendliness or sexual attraction, revealing dress may be worn simply to look nice or to convey sexual availability, agreeing to go to someone’s apartment may be done in order to talk quietly or to signal willingness to have sex. These cues can have multiple meanings and individuals must attempt to determine the intended meaning in the particular situation.

Hall (1993:465) found in her restaurant study that waitresses participate in what can be labelled the flirting game although some prefer to call their manners ‘a different kind of friendly’ – they do not want to be associated with ‘that kind’ of woman. Others are more open or even cynical about the circumstances. They accept flirting as a part of the interaction and flirting can be seen as a ‘this is my job’ attitude or a specific service style.

I represent a profession where charm and flirt are natural components in the customer interaction and I believe we’re expected to charm and flirt. [Tour rep]

I flirt to sell more; I don’t have to be attracted to the customer. But on the other hand, I just might be... [Shop assistant]

In this line of business, I’m supposed to engage in some flirting. [...] It’s simply a part of the job and it can be really nice, absolutely. [Waitress/bartender]

To consider the use of flirt in a non-serious or friendly way combined with a perception of flirt as a serving style (Hall 1993) is also noticeable in our qualitative study. One of the waitresses says:

[I flirt] only with regulars and then it’s kept at a joking level. I’m not flirting to achieve something personal...the old men appreciate when you give them the eye. I can honestly say that our regulars don’t tip well so it’s basically done in order to create a pleasant atmosphere.

A bartender says that he certainly flirts with customers but not with – as he puts it – a ‘practical purpose’:

A co-worker’s [A] mother was here the other night and a lot of chicks believed he [A] was my son and they thought he was really cute, and then they hit on me. So I said to [A’s] mother ‘then we must have slept with each other’ and she said ‘Yes, you would like that, wouldn’t you?’ and I replied ‘Yeah, maybe’. It’s on that level [sexual banter] with the female customers, and they appreciate that because then they feel attractive...
These comments clearly show how flirting is indeed emotional labour with the purpose of creating a certain atmosphere. In connection with the flirtatious behaviour, a shop assistant says:

"I want to create an experience for the customer. The customer doesn’t come into the store just to shop, he buys an experience. Not everyone thinks of it, but it’s possible to do a lot in order to create that experience. We have talked about doing a bit more than the customer expects. It has to do with experiences."

For some customers, flirtatious employee behaviour may lead to perceived high service quality (Fuller & Smith 1996) and in terms of the flirting game, one waitress in Hall’s (1993:464) study says, ‘there’s always that sexual attraction…if there’s four or five guys at a table and they have a waitress, there’s sort of a little bit of a flirting thing’. The waitresses in Hall’s (1993:465) study know that their behaviour is in fact flirtatious but they emphasise that it is not ‘real flirting’, not in the way flirting is understood and perceived outside the restaurant. Our qualitative data give a similar picture as respondents claim that they flirt with the primary intention of making the customer feel relaxed and/or special. It is also interesting to note that employees seem to flirt more with regulars, which may further support the theory that flirting with customers is primarily an expression of a friendly relationship. In a conversation on flirting and sexual harassment, one waitress/bartender says, ‘With some [customers I know] I may have a rather coarse jargon. [...] You sense when it’s for fun and when it’s not fun at all.’ The interviews also reveal that flirting with customers is sometimes a result of sexual attraction; a tour rep tells us that he tries to be attractive in the eyes of those he finds attractive, and a shop assistant admits to be attracted to some of the customers she flirts with.

Being (generally) flirtatious has a slightly negative connotation and the majority would probably not label themselves in such terms. Instead, charm is something admirable and a quality many find attractive and desired, although there is no common definition of what charm is among the respondents. A shop assistant says, ‘What is charm? I always try to be happy and nice – is that charm? When one waitress is asked to define charm, she becomes hesitant:

Hmm, how would I define it [charm]? A personality that...that...kind of appeals to me. Then I might consider that person charming, that there is a certain charm. I don’t know, it’s difficult. What is charm? I have no idea!
A tour rep says, ‘The first thing that comes to mind [regarding charm] is a person who is very cute and uses that’ while a shop assistant says, ‘Charm is probably something connected to one’s personality […] The things you like about a person is charm, I believe.’ At first glance, it seems that everyone knows what charm is, but on closer inspection, the concept is difficult to define objectively. The Webster’s online dictionary\(^2\) defines charm as ‘attractiveness that interests or pleases or stimulates’, which in fact may include a variety of different features. Flirt on the other hand is defined as ‘playful behavior intended to arouse sexual interest’. Attraction in some form is a prominent feature in both charm and flirt and there might not be a significant difference between the two since they seem – at least partly – to overlap.

The thing with charm and flirt is that it differs from person to person. It happens, if a customer expects or starts, that I hook on a little for fun, but since our customers are mostly women it’s naturally not [flirting]; but then again, it depends on how you define flirt. I mean, if you try to approach a person in a joking way, if you consider that flirting… [Shop assistant]

Sunoo (2000:130) quotes an architect who says, ‘I go out of my way to be extra charming […] Flirtation is a two-way thing. You have to use your intuition. It should be a win-win.’ It is interesting to note how this person uses the words charm and flirt in a synonymous way. One of the respondents in our study does not see any difference between being charming and flirtatious and says, ‘To me [charm] is sort of flirting.’ In the article just mentioned, Sunoo (2000:130) refers to Jill Spiegel – author of *Flirting for success* – who suggests a redefinition of the term flirt as ‘building your self-esteem and others’ by creating sincere rapport.’ One of our respondents discusses flirt and charm in the following way:

> Being a bit flirty can mean that you’re a bit lively, sort of. It doesn’t mean you’re standing there saying ‘you’re beautiful’, more like ‘that blue mobile phone goes great with your eyes’, sort of. [Shop assistant]

His experiences also tell him that behaviour perceived as flirt among younger women is perceived in terms of charm or when the target is an older woman who possibly is accompanied by her husband. It might not be particularly pinpointed behaviour or manner that decides what is flirt and what is charm but

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\(^2\) [http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org](http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org)
the employee’s intention and the customer’s perception of a specific behaviour.
A waitress comments on the subject:

I’m just being nice and honest towards the guests and unfortunately that’s perceived as being flirtatious. I say ‘unfortunately’ because I have had many women and girlfriends against me because I have talked to their boyfriends or husbands. They [the women] have not accepted my behaviour.

Related to this statement, Shotland and Craig (1988:71) conclude that ‘a person may feel that he or she is indicating only friendly intent, when many or most people might interpret this behavior as a sign of sexual interest. […] There are no objective criteria for interested and for friendly behavior’. With reference to Hall (1993), our data slightly suggest that charm is a desirable personal quality while flirty is not (table 31 and 32).

<table>
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<th>Table 31: Flirting with customers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Often being flirtatious</td>
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<td>Seldom being flirtatious</td>
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<td>Never being flirtatious</td>
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‘Waiters [male] tend to be more friendly with female customers whereas waitresses [female] are more friendly with male customers’ (Hall 1993:460-461). One waiter in Hall’s (1993:461) study says that he turns up the charm and smiles a lot more for women customers while the waitresses play up to businessmen. A male tour rep in our study says, ‘I am more charming towards girls and women since I’m a guy.’ Expressions such as ‘turning up the charm’ and ‘play up to’ have indeed a flirtatious undertone. In an interview with Steve Dublanica – writer of the book *Waiter Rant* – he says the following (New York Magazine, 30 July 2008):

I had a waiter who was physically stunning. She went into medical sales. She was enthusiastic, and she was that rare waitress that could seduce men but not alienate women (some women might get testy in that situation). She would always walk out with the most money. I was jealous of that, but in order to get the gift I’d have to go through significant reconstructive surgery.
Dublanica’s statement illustrates how good looks may pay off and especially in combination with seductive behaviour. Foremost the pay off is about tips; in the internet issue of Nerve (22 July 2004), one female bartender says:

Bartenders flirt, but it’s a business and 90% of the time it’s done because money is involved. At first, it’s flattering to have someone flirt with you, but after a while it’s like, enough already.

Economic reasons for flirting are apparent among our respondents as well; a shop assistant in home electronics says, ‘You probably don’t flirt in the same way you do in bars; perhaps more happy and lively, focusing on the woman [in a couple] because you know she’s the most decisive [when it comes to what to buy].’ Although service providers flirt for economic reasons, a seductive or flirtatious behaviour may pay off in other ways as well. By using strategic flirting (Lerum 2004), sexual banter (Loe 1996), and sexual innuendo (Sanders 2004) customers may be easier to deal with in various ways and thus the service interaction could be facilitated from the employee’s perspective. Reynolds and Harris (2006:103) talk about service employees’ dealing with deviant customer behaviour and one strategy is ‘exploiting sexual attractiveness’; a female in the hospitality industry says:

Men go all gooey if you flash a little cleavage or show a little thigh. Male customers are just men who’re in here – they still go gooey.

According to Kray and Locke (2008), a survey conducted by Harper’s Bazaar magazine – including five hundred professional women – revealed that 86 percent would flirt with a male colleague if it meant they got their own way. A waitress/bartender in our study who engages in flirting behaviour and uses charm in the service interaction says, ‘Hopefully they [customers] think: oh what a fun and charming girl, let’s give her money.’ Kray and Locke (2008:484)
conclude that ‘the idea that women can use sexual power to their advantage is not new’ and the findings from their experimental study shows that flirtatious behaviour influences likeability. Conversely, flirtatious people are ‘judged to be less authentic and more manipulative’ (Kray & Locke 2008:492).

A female bartender at The Pigskin Sports Bar & Grill thinks a flirtatious behaviour emerges due to the bar atmosphere, she does not flirt for money reasons and says, ‘I like to flirt with people; it’s fun. Flirting is harmless’ (The Post, November 3, 2006). In the same article, another female bartender says that if a customer is coming on to her obnoxiously she transfers it to a joke to maintain business and alleviate tension. She also says that flirtatious joking guarantees that the customer will stay longer, tip well, and return another time.

Flirting on its own seems appreciated or desirable by some employees as long it is not coarse and is kept under control.

"[Flirting] can be very nice but it has to be done right so to speak, that you agree on the boundaries and are perceptive. When I’m a customer I can be irritated by intrusive attempts by employees to flirt. I take offence and wonder ‘do I look easy to seduce?’ Do you know what I mean? [Shop assistant]

It is always nice to have someone flirting with you, as long it’s kept at a decent level. [Tour rep]

Sometimes I flirt just for the sake of flirting, I think it’s fun to see how far I can take it. I guess I do it to brighten up my day. A flirt is not about hurting anyone, it’s supposed to be nice, something mutually appreciated. [It should be] something I can think of later while driving home ‘damn, it felt good talking to him’ even if I wouldn’t consider going out with him on a date. [Waitress]

Although being flirty is not a desirable characteristic in general terms, our findings reveal that as many as 25 percent of service employees say that they actually do flirt with customers at varied degrees. The gender pattern is somewhat expectable since single men are the most flirtatious (49 %), followed by single women (29 %) and married men or men in relationships (28 %) while married women or women in relationships flirt the least (16 %). When it comes to charming customers, a reversed picture appears with women in relationships or married being the ones who use charm most often when interacting with customers – 45% claim to use charm to a great extent. Unfortunately, our data do not reveal any concrete examples of what service employees would consider being flirt and charm respectively. When the waitresses in Hall’s (1993) study label their flirtatious behaviour in terms of ‘a different kind of friendly’ or ‘a friendly flirt’, Hall (1993:465) says that ‘they are performing a job flirt as part of their appropriate work role of waitressing’. It is, however, possible that the
same kind of behaviour is called flirt when the employee is somewhat attracted to the customer and called charm when there is no such attraction from the employee’s side. A male respondent in our study says, ‘it is painless to flirt with an attractive woman’ and a female respondent says, ‘of course I’d rather flirt with a good looking person.’

Not just employees flirt with customers. Our study shows that 52 percent of employees experience customers flirting with them. Customers being flirtatious are experienced differently - some employees appreciate it and others do not.

I have been asked out but I’ve never gone through with it. When it happens, I turn down the invitation in a nice way. It doesn’t feel unpleasant but awkward, like ‘these people are going to build a house, why is she saying this?’ It doesn’t happen often but it does happen. [House salesman]

If they are drinking, they may start telling vulgar jokes […]. ‘Are you single? The next time I’m here I want you to sit and eat with us.’ […] I had a guest this Saturday who said ‘you can call me’. ‘No, I’m not calling anyone, [I told him] No, I’m not pissed but that’s my policy. I do not hit on the guests at the restaurant.’ […] He was a bit unhappy because I did not let him give me his telephone number. [Waitress]

During that terrible single’s week we had, I got approached on a daily basis by women in their fifties with invitations including everything from having dinner to coming up to their room. [Tour rep]

A lot of people lose their barrier when they get abroad. It’s okay to relentlessly hit on the tour rep, so … it’s a nice job. [Tour rep]

Sometimes they [customers] flirt; it’s quite fun, I feel appreciated. [Shop assistant]

As recently as yesterday I was asked out on a date but I couldn’t agree since I have a girlfriend. Obviously I had made a good impression and [being asked out] is an ego boost. [Shop assistant]

I do get asked out on dates; they [customers] think it fun, I don’t. Usually it’s kept at a decent level but sometimes it gets out of hand. Some they cross the line, definitely. Then I have to give a roar, telling them it’s actually not alright. [Waitress/bartender]

Customers coming on to employees have been noticed by other researchers as well and ‘the line between flirting and sexual harassment is paper-thin’ (Sunoo 2000:130); in Tracy’s (2000:110) study on work on a cruise ship, one member recalls:

There was this man at the disco and he asked me to dance. He was grabbing and holding me close […] I took it as if he had paid for the cruise and that we, as cruise staff, are part of his cruise [After the dance].
In some service settings, sexual objectification comes with the territory. Hall (1993:456), for example, argues that ‘restaurants do gender by structuring interactions of women servers as sexual objects’, and Hochschild (1983:94) claims that ‘beyond being unfailingly helpful and open to requests [the flight attendant] must respond to the sexual fantasies of passengers. She must try to feel and act as if flirting and propositioning is ‘a sign of my attractiveness and your sexiness’. A flight attendant in Williams’ (2003:535) study describes how an overweight unattractive banker in his 50s hit on her relentlessly:

I said ‘but aren’t you married?’ and he replied ‘Yes but my wife and I have got an understanding.’ I said ‘I am not interested’ and he said ‘I’m sure you will change your mind.’ […] so I said ‘I am sorry I have got a boyfriend’ which I didn’t have at the time.

Fine et al. (1994:21) claim that ‘the selling profession has always been subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, infused with sexual overtones’. Sex sells and thus the use of sex in advertising is extremely common (Duncan 2002). Airlines have used slogans such as *We really move our tails for you to make your every wish come true* (Continental Airlines), and *Fly me, you’ll like it* (National Airlines) (Hochschild 1983); the Spirit Cruise Line has a service programme proclaiming *We never say no* (Tracy 2000). With sexual allusions and sexual innuendo in slogans and other more or less official documents, it may be difficult for employees to shield themselves from customers’ gazes, comments, and even inappropriate touches. This may be the case for both men and women but traditionally more women than men are likely to be viewed and treated as sexual objects (Fine et al. 1994). Sometimes customers cross the line between flirting and harassment; a waitress recalls an occasion when some male customers greeted her by saying ‘here comes dessert’ (Hall 1993:464) and a flight attendant reports how passengers are ‘putting their hands on our hips as they pass us in the aisle’ (Williams 2003:536). Another obvious example of customers crossing the line is provided by a tour rep in Abiala’s (2000:63, *writers’ translation*) study:

It was a married man who took a fancy to me. He did hit on me because I was alone and had a single room. Pulled down his pants on the sly and showed me. Can I tell him he is a creep, or that I’m not interested, or should I ignore him? I think I didn’t say anything. Later, he gave a long rapport on his questionnaire on how worthless I was as a guide.

A waitress in our study recalls an incident that happened when there was a conference at the establishment:
It was a conference and I believe they were about 200 attendants, 90-95 percent middle-aged men. Maybe boring lives at home, I don't have a clue, but they were really foul-mouthed. [...] I came to serve coffee and they started 'honey, let's go to my room' and 'you're delicious, if I'd been 20 years younger I would take you right here, right now.' We had to wear skirts that night and I don't like wearing a skirt because of things like this. Suddenly I feel a hand on my thigh's inside moving up towards my butt. It wasn't nice at all.

Another waitress has a similar story to tell:

He [a customer] slid his hand up under my skirt while I was squeezed between two tables just about to serve. I turned around and hit him and then the bouncers threw him out.

In a study on gratuitous sexual content in advertising, Sengupta and Dahl (2008:63) found that men display ‘a more positive spontaneous reaction to gratuitous sex appeals than women’. Advertisements in the aviation business, for example, are often sexual and suggest that ‘in the air, anything can happen’ (Hochschild 1983:93). This is supported by the following comments from a flight attendant in Williams (2003:536) study:

Flight attendants have a bad reputation amongst the general public as over paid, husband hunting, money grabbing ‘flying mattresses’.

A flight attendant in Hochschild's (1983:93) study says:

You have married men with three kids getting on the plane and suddenly they feel anything goes. It's like they leave that reality on the ground, and you fit into their fantasy as some geisha girl. It happens over and over again.

Sengupta and Dahl (2008:64) conclude that ‘men seem to have a substantially greater preference for casual, noninvested sex than women’ and Shotland and Craig (1988:66) suggest that ‘men may see the world through sexual glasses and may assume that women share the same level of interest in sex’. In addition, a study by Fitzgerald and Weitzman (1990) revealed that a majority of 235 male respondents was engaged in behaviour that could legally constitute sexual harassment, but less than 0.5 percent labelled their behaviour as sexual harassment. The gender difference in attitude is illustrated by Williams (2003) who suggests that women flight attendants get angry and frustrated by male

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3 The term gratuitous sexual content refers to irrelevant sexual material in ads for the product in question. One example: Toya Tires used a nude female model crouched on all fours with the tagline ‘Tires that fit you’ in an ad campaign (Sengupta & Dahl 2008:63).
passengers’ sexual invitations or even harassments; male cabin crew members have a different opinion:

The sexual harassment of male staff by women passengers was not regarded as a problem. Men said that it happened occasionally but they loved it, or, alternatively they said things like, ‘I wish’ or ‘No such luck.’ (Williams 2003:538)

This is in line with Heslin et al. (1983:147) who conclude that a ‘touch from an opposite-sex stranger, is considered to be unpleasant by women but quite pleasant by men.’ Abbey’s (1987) research suggests that men expect women to be flattered when hit on, even if the woman in question is not interested; women, on the other hand, expect such misunderstandings to offend and the initiator should be apologetic. Many service jobs are typically female and if companies advertise themselves in a sexual way and men do not think gratuitous sex is odd or that their behaviour is sexual harassment, one might understand why some men do not think it is out of place to put – gratuitously – their hand on the butt of a flight attendant or a waitress.

It is easy to get the impression that service providers flirt with customers for strategic reasons that have little or nothing to do with sexual attractiveness or sexual intensions, while customers’ flirting is interpreted as acts with a sexual intention. This may be wrong; customers who flirt may have other non-sexual intentions with their behaviour. A house salesman in our study believes that those who flirt with him do it with the primary intention of getting a good financial deal and a tour rep is convinced that customers who use charm and flirt are after something, seeking some kind of benefit. It is, however, possible to imagine service providers who flirt because they are drawn sexually to the customer in question and may have sexual intentions with their behaviour.

**HUMOUR**

‘Everybody loves humour’ (Lyttle 2007:239) and humour has the ability to bring about a positive frame of mind, which in turn fosters interpersonal attraction (Cooper 2005). Service interaction is greatly about matching; the employee must accommodate the customer, so if the customer is humorous, the employee should be jocular (Bettencourt and Gwinner 1996). Humour in service interaction is appreciated due to its power to create an overall pleasant atmosphere (Gremler and Gwinner 2000) and can be used even as a way of developing rapport between service provider and service receiver (Francis et al. 1999). Our results reveal that almost all service employees use humour in varied
degrees in the service interaction. There are no significant differences between men and women, and more than 50 percent use humour to a large extent (table 33).

Table 33: Using humour in the service encounter. Chi-Square: 0.756

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Often using humour</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom using humour</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never using humour</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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‘Comedic performances manipulate consumer emotions’ (Locke 1996:43) and Sanders (2004) suggests that jocular banter in some services is a calculated strategy to attract and maintain customers. Humour is a specific interactional technique of managing another's emotions (Francis et al. 1999) and if an individual is in a positive emotional state, he or she is easier to persuade (Cooper 2005), which is good for business. Our respondents were asked why they use humour in the service interaction:

- To make the guests feel happy and also to have fun myself. If the guests are having a good time, I have a good time too. [Bartender/Waiter]
- To relieve the atmosphere. [Waitress/Bartender]
- To break the ice. [Shop assistant]
- The customers notice that we have fun at work and it's contagious. They get relaxed… [Shop assistant]
- I believe most customers appreciate if you have a laugh with them... well, joking and having fun. Most people think it really enhances their time at the restaurant. [Bartender]

When one of the waitresses says that she uses humour ‘to make the guest happier and nicer’ [italics added] and a tour rep says that he uses humour to ‘sometimes get out of a situation’, it is clear that humour has the potential to facilitate the service encounter from the employee's perspective. In addition, humour can be used as a tool to repair a service failure of some kind. A waitess/bartender says that she uses humour to distract attention from what it was that made the customer dissatisfied in the first place and by using humour,
the tense or irritated customers can hopefully relax and regain a positive frame of mind.

If they [customers] make a remark about something I may say: ‘A good looking man as you shouldn’t sit here being grumpy.’ I certainly don’t think he’s good looking but I certainly think he’s grumpy and since I began with giving him a compliment his brain sort of stops working and he thinks: ‘oh God, how nice she is’ although I have [criticized him]. By this I’m able to reprimand him at the same time we’re having a laugh and he thinks it’s a bit funny. It is easy, don’t you think? [Waitress/bartender]

Despite strategic reasons, employees who use humour may also experience the emotion of fun (Locke 1996), which is evident in our interviews. A house salesman says, ‘You laugh, it’s positive. It provokes endorphins, you become happier.’

Although humour generally is seen to be positive, jocular behaviour brings with it a risk of disapproval or even offence dependent on individual humour preferences (Lyttle 2007). Sometimes the attempts to be funny fail which is commented on by a waitress/bartender who says, ‘You’ve got to have instinctive feeling [but sometimes] it doesn’t turn out as great as intended, it gets kind of quiet and awkward.’ A waitress in Hall’s (1993) study describes how she likes to join regulars at their table to tell racist and sexist jokes while a respondent in our study makes it clear that he does not appreciate racist jokes at all. A common stance amongst the respondents is that jokes about ethnic origin and sexual orientation are inappropriate.

Because of individual preferences, Lyttle (2007) suggests that workplace humour should be planned and prepared in advance, which in practise leads to the occurrence of ‘routinized humour’. The problem with pre-planned or routinized humour is the risk of not being fun at all since it usually ignores the important spontaneity and the ability to catch the moment. Since much humour is spontaneous and emerges in the moment, the interviewed find it difficult to give concrete examples of what they do; a tour rep says, ‘It is difficult to give an example here and now… I’m having a blackout.’ Another respondent says it is possible to joke about anything but his only concrete example is ‘the weather’:

> It could be anything; you can joke about the bad weather, well... basically anything. [Shop assistant]

Employees do adopt the concept of routinized humour (to various degrees), which sometimes is a result of working in a specific line of business. When discussing houses with potential buyers, a house salesman says he, on a regular basis, uses the company name to make what he thinks an inventive joke.
bartender says he tells customers from Norway that there is a Norwegian clause forbidding them to order certain brands of beer – ‘most of them find it really funny.’ Service providers probably have experience and knowledge from interacting with customers regarding what does and does not work. When a waitress/bartender in our study says, ‘I usually make comments about how good looking everyone is, that has become sort of my thing’, it is an example of routinized customer treatment. The humour aspect comes along when she continues by saying ‘…and that is definitely humour because it’s not true. Not at all. Not in any way.’ This kind of humour may be viewed as ironic and insulting if customers feel that her comments are not serious. The reason she continues to make ‘dishonest’ compliments is because it is working in some way; for a night out, people usually dress up and try to look their best and the waitress/bartenders compliments may pay off in form of better tips.

Francis et al. (1999) observe the importance of context – how people, place, and time interact and determine whether expressed humour is appreciated or not. What is perceived as being funny is not static, which may explain why the same person might find a particular joke funny one day and not funny another day. In service interaction, a decision to express humour is a judgement call. Our interviews reveal that employees are aware of the importance to ‘read’ the situation and adjust their behaviour in accordance to customer preferences when it comes to using humour in the customer interaction.

You scan the guest. If a middle-aged man takes his Mrs. out for dinner, you may jokingly say, ‘Oh, you’re gorgeous tonight, taking the wife out. I hope you’re paying, she shouldn’t have to.’ Cracking jokes like that and he either laughs or angrily mutters ‘uh-hmm’. If the man gets one of those ‘uh-hmm-expressions’ you know you can’t joke with that one. [Waitress]

You get skilled at sensing who can take a joke, and the humour has to match the person. [Tour rep]

Most of the time you get a hint from the customer saying ‘it is okay to joke with me’; it can be a smile or body language. It’s a certain feeling you get with some customers, it’s hard to explain. [Shop assistant]

Respondents report repeatedly how important it is to ‘read’ or ‘scan’ the customer when it comes to joking and some respondents also highlight the time aspect:

Usually I sense if I can joke with a particular customer but I won’t begin joking immediately. You have to know the customer before you can joke with him or her. I guess it takes a while before you can do that. [House salesman]
A shop assistant says, ‘Some customers make jokes about themselves quite a bit and that usually means it’s alright to join in.’ As the service provider gets to know the customer, the joking may take on an insulting character and this type of humour may be most prominent in the interaction between regular customers and employees. One waiter/bartender says:

Some customers, or more of semi-regulars, appreciate if you insult them a little and stuff like that – ‘no, are you going to eat that toast again, you’re bloody boring.’ Most or everyone thinks it’s really funny when I say that, or ‘Not Spaten [a brand of beer] again, you’ll get scurvy, you have been drinking Spaten for the last 14 years.’ [...] I like to insult them I believe, but in a charming way.

A woman in a clothing store gives a similar description of the insulting aspect of humour in the service encounter:

I might say ‘Oh my God, you can’t go dressed like that, you understand?’ or ‘that would look great, if you were 18 years old’. Some customers think it is funny and uplifting if you tease them a bit but there are limits to how rude you can be.

When service providers talk about ‘charming insults’ and ‘limits of rudeness’, one gets the impression that these employees do not wish to be mean to their customers; on the contrary, the behaviour may be about bonding, viewed as a sign of some kind of friendship, appreciation and affection. The (joking) insults are not of a kind that presumably would hurt the customer; a waitress/bartender says, ‘If a guest has a really big nose, of course I wouldn’t say, ‘so here you are with that huge snout, ha-ha!’ because he probably wouldn’t appreciate it.’

Besides joking insults, practical jokes or ‘pulling one’s leg’ may be executed as the relationship deepens. A house salesman, for example, fooled a customer into believing that an inner wall would be in a different place than marked on the blue prints. Practical jokes may be executed to explore someone’s character and his or her ability to take a joke, or as a respondent in Sander’s (2004:276) study says, ‘To make sure you are the same as us’. If the exposed person ‘stands the test’, the relationship moves to another level (Sanders 2004). In addition, practical jokes might be used on colleagues and then customers become the audience, regardless of whether or not they understand the joke:

I remember one time a colleague and I were in a bus full of guests and I fooled the passengers to believe it was her [the colleague’s] birthday. Everyone in the bus was singing for her. I think stuff like that is funny, pulling someone’s leg. [Tour rep]
Customers also use humour in the service interaction although the respondents have difficulties giving any concrete examples. A respondent in the restaurant business says that especially middle-aged men – the average Joes – try to be funny but most of time they are not. A tour rep says that guests constantly pull his leg. Humour at work is not only about conscious attempts to be funny or to create an amusing situation. There might as well be humorous situations embedded in the service context where the employee is not an active participant but still makes the employee experience a good time at work:

I had this Swiss guest who was skiing in lederhosen with big suspenders. I’m a big fan of everyday humour. [Tour rep/Ski instructor]

Although there seems to be a relation between charm and flirt (Hall 1993), there seems to be a relation between charm and humour as well. When the waiter/bartender who says he insults customers in a charming way is asked to explain what he means, he says:

Basically making the customers laugh, sort of ‘oh no, are you here again’ and ‘well, I guess you will sit here as usual.’ The thing with charm is that it’s difficult to describe.

The indistinct connection among friendliness, charm, flirt, and humour may be illustrated in the following citation from one of the respondents:

I believe friendly and charming has a bit of a connection, although charm and flirt can be linked together as well. It’s tough [to clarify] but from being funny the natural step would be flirtatious rather than charming. Charm has more to do with friendliness I think. But on the other hand, that might be the case with flirt as well…

DEALING WITH TROUBLESOME OR RUDE CUSTOMERS

In the nature of service lies inequality - one individual serves another. Customers are (usually) paying for services and they probably hold certain expectations and demands about how situations and errands should be handled. A call-centre customer in Bolton and Houlihan’s (2005:693) study says:

Service to me means that when I ask for something I get it. I get it when I ask for it and not when some stroppy girl on the other end of the phone gets around to it and I also expect her to be pleasant with it. I am the customer, after all, and isn’t the customer always right?
From the employee side, a tour rep in our study concludes:

I do hold a service occupation and I can’t say whatever I want to customers but at the same time, there is a limit to how much I can tolerate. I’m only human and I don’t believe I should take a whole world of crap. [Tour rep]

To encounter troublesome, arrogant, rude or even aggressive customers seems to be common in customer intense work. A majority of the call-centre employees in Grandey et al.’s (2004:411) study ‘received calls from verbally aggressive customers daily’. A waitress/bartender in our study brings to mind the following threatening incident:

There were two immigrant guys at the bar shouting really loud ‘we want beer, we want beer, we want beer’. I told them to be quiet and that I would serve them as soon as I could. Then they started shouting that they would kill me so I called the bouncer and he threw them out. After that they said would kill me again, and rape me a bit, and some other threats. [Waitress/bartender]

It may not be explicitly rude or aggressive behaviour, however, that irritates service providers; a shop assistant says she gets irritated at customers who ‘make an excessive mess’ and ‘bad-mouth’ the store while being there, and a waitress/bartender can not stand physical contact with customers.

When discussing customer behaviour there is no common view on what is natural, acceptable, or intolerable. Customer misbehaviour or deviant customer behaviour is defined by Reynolds and Harris (2006:95) as ‘deliberate acts by customers that violate widely held norms’. However, in a context where ‘the customer is always right’ it may indeed be difficult to define, as well as agree on these ‘widely held norms’. In a policy document (Satisfied customers – Our future) to newly employed workers at a retail chain store, the following instructions are written for handling irritated customers (Abiala 2000:73, writers’ translation):

Keep calm when interacting with irritated customers. Do not take his anger or frustration personally, directed at you [...] In conflicts, keep your cool, support each other [...] Never accuse a customer of lying. Try to take on a positive attitude without lowering your duty [...] Never let a dissatisfied customer walk away.

The notion of the customer always being right brings certain elements to the interaction between employees and customers. Many service workers feel an obligation to make the customers content and believe that they have the right to behave in a certain way because they are paying customers. The respondents
talk about customers entering the service interaction with a preconceived notion that they will be disappointed.

I've met several guests who on the first day say something like ‘let’s see what will go wrong this time’ or ‘let’s see if it’s just as bad as the last time’. If you have that attitude, I mean you can always find flaws if you’re focused on finding it. [Tour rep]

I think it’s strange how some people on a night out start with this attitude saying ‘this will probably be a bad night’. If I had that expectation, I would stay at home instead. [...] Why assume that it will be bad? By starting the evening in a bad mood, chances are you’ll be treated the same way. The [prophecy] comes true right from the beginning and it just goes on from there. Stupid! [Waitress/bartender]

At times there seems to be almost a war going on between customers and employees. A respondent in Harris and Ogbonna’s (2002:170) study puts it this way:

Managers have always asked for more than’s fair and customers have always wanted something for nothing. Getting back at them is natural – it’s always happened, nothing new in that.

Customer misbehaviour is fuelled by the prevalent ‘philosophy of service as pleasing customers, indulging them and giving them what they want’ (Yagil 2008:142). Reynolds and Harris (2006) highlight how customer focus brings about a notion of the customer as ‘king’, which sometimes is expressed by the customer being a dictator. Abiala (2000:117, writers’ translation) presents the following quotations from two shop assistants.

Sudden personal attacks. There are customers who are mean. In some way it’s legitimate to yell at the shop assistants. I can’t discontinue and drop the customer I’m serving to attend to the needs of the customer who hollers the loudest.

Then there are days when the customers are worse than ever. They have time off from hell.

Occasionally, customers try to put the provider in their place. In the following section, a waitress/bartender discusses this phenomenon:

They [middle-aged average Janes] may have seen and heard on television that Chardonnay is the thing, that’s what you should drink. So they ask if I have any high-class Chardonnay and I reply ‘No, I don’t’ because I haven’t, and then they grunt and snort a bit. So I say ‘I have this instead and it’s great’ and she doesn’t know what to say because basically she knows nothing about wine. When she sees it’s expensive she says ‘yes, I’ve heard about that wine’ and then she sits there drinking that disgusting half dry Riesling instead, having no idea what she’s talking about. She just tries to put me in my place. It’s really ridiculous. I can immediately identify who in the
Customers may demand more than service providers think is reasonable or more than the company is willing to offer:

I had a guest here this Sunday who was really peevish; they had been waiting a long time for their food. I had to explain that we have other guests as well, ‘you’re not the only one here and they [other guests] were here before you, so you have to wait your turn.’ Then the woman got really angry and said, ‘Well then, I think you should offer us free dessert’ …eehh? [Waitress]

Quite often customers complain about ruptured jeans although they’ve worn them every day for the past six months. Come on, you must have some kind of common sense. [Shop assistant]

There was this daughter who hadn’t checked her airline ticket and missed the plane to Vienna; she was only booked on the flight to Berlin. Then the mother thought it all was our fault and demanded to get a total refund. I called my boss who said the company could offer a refund for the flight to Berlin but the daughter had to pay for the flight to Vienna herself. [...] I called the mother and told her what we could offer and she thought it was a total flop and said ‘if you don’t fix it, I will call the papers and they will write about this.’ So I called my boss again, said the mother wouldn’t accept the offer and that she threatens to go to the media. My boss said ‘the papers won’t write about this, she only thinks they will. You have to tell her kindly but firmly that this is the best we can do and that the customer is obliged to check the airline ticket. So I called the mother once again to tell her she couldn’t get a total refund and she was really snotty, I had barely begun speaking before she started to rant and rave. Finally I had to say ‘excuse me, will you shut up for a while?’ […] The last thing she said was something like ‘well then, now that I know what kind of travel agency you are, let’s see what the papers think of this’. I replied ‘that’s fine, give them my regards; then I hung up. [Travel agent]

Another description about troublesome customers is given by a receptionist in Harris and Ogbonna’s study (2002:173-174) who says the following:

You’ve got no idea just how devastating customers can be. I’ve gone home in tears, I’d had people insult me and abuse me in ways I don’t even want to remember. You can hold your tongue for a while, you can smile it off for a bit but you try that after a 10-hour shift – it’s impossible. The longer you talk to customers the more you hate them!

A receptionist in our study has a somewhat similar experience and says, ‘I get a lot of crap from customers regarding things out of my control.’ Sometimes service providers encounter lying or deceptive customers as the following statements illustrate:
I get furious when they [customers] try to fool me. [...] It happens that customers break or destroy something in the house themselves and try to blame the builders. Then I get mad! [House salesman]

Let’s say I offer something free of charge to close a deal, and I always write down what I promise. [later the customer says] ‘you also promised this’. I say ‘no, look here. These are the notes from the meeting we had, I did not promise you that but if you want it, it’s going to cost you this much’. [House salesman]

Table 34: Frequency of encountering difficult customers. Chi Square: 0.008

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes every week</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes every month</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sometimes every year</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Sum</td>
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Abiala’s (2000) study on service work reveals that every tenth employee encounters ‘troublesome’ customers on a daily basis, which is similar to our results (table 34). Our data show that 33 percent encounter difficult customers often (daily or weekly) and women are significantly more exposed to such customers.

There are different ways to deal with bad-mannered customers. One strategy is to ‘bite the bullet’ and continue to be as nice and servile as possible despite the customer’s behaviour. The following narrative is an example of this strategy:

I had this guest who got really upset because we didn’t have the particular dark chocolate he wanted to have with his cognac; he got really angry after being nice all night. [...] So I tried to explain but he got angrier the more I explained so finally I said ‘do you want truffle’ and he looked at me as if I was stupid and said ‘of course I don’t’. [Waitress/bartender]

Another strategy is ‘make believe’, that is, pretending (surface acting), or even truly believing (deep acting) that there is some underlying reason for bad customer behaviour (Hochschild 1983). As an employee, one can imagine or pretend that a misbehaving customer has some kind of personal problem or distress and that is why he or she is behaving rude. Hochschild (1983:55) gives the following example of a flight attendant’s deep acting:
I try to remember that if he’s drinking too much, he’s probably scared of flying. I think to myself, “he’s like a little child.” Really, that’s what he is. And when I see him that way, I don’t get mad that he’s yelling at me. He’s like a little child yelling at me then.

Yet another strategy is ‘depersonalization’, which is explained by a tour rep in Guerrier and Adib’s (2003:1407-1408) study in the following way:

You develop a kind of immunity. You learn to put it into perspective [...], after a while you realize that it’s not necessarily you that they’re swearing at, it’s that badge.

The ‘depersonalization’ strategy is found as well among the call-centre employees in Grandey et al.’s (2004:413) study in which most respondents say they cope with aggressive customers by not taking it personally. Our study also reveals his strategy:

Usually when customers come in raged because they had a bad trip they’re not mad at me as a person. I just happen to be the person standing behind the counter when they came in. I don’t take it personally. [Travel agent]

A modification of the depersonalisation strategy is to simply ignore or overlook deviant behaviour. Some respondents who use this strategy ‘feel that they are not paid enough to take physical risks in directly tackling deviant customer behaviors’ (Reynolds & Harris 2006:101).

A third strategy would be the opposite of ‘depersonalisation’ as the employee tries to show the customer that he or she is a human being with real feelings; such a strategy is illustrated by another tour rep in Guerrier and Adib’s (2003:1407-1408) study who says:

I mean people have pointed at me and I’ve had to say to them, ‘Look, you know, I’m not.... I’m a person, I’m a human being, I’m not someone you can, you know, do what you like to, you know, we do have feelings as well’.

To let the customer know the employee is displeased with his or her attitude or behaviour, or even tell the customer off could be seen as a confrontation strategy and such behaviour is noticed in our interviews as well:

If I think they [customers] are behaving badly I show it. First I fasten my eyes on the person and if it continues, I put my foot down. [Waitress/bartender]

I used to tell them ‘that’s enough; I think you’ve crossed the line. We have nothing more to say to each other. You’re just being rude and now I want you to leave.’ If they
don’t back off, I call security and they come to escort them [customers] out. [Travel agent]

There are also stories about colleagues who had enough of customers. Hochschild (1983:127) writes an example:

I was told repeatedly, and with great relish, the story of one smile-fighter’s victory, which goes like this. A young businessman said to a flight attendant, ‘Why aren’t you smiling?’ She put her tray back on the food cart, looked him in the eye and said, ‘I’ll tell you what. You smile first, then I’ll smile.’ The businessman smiled at her. ‘Good,’ she replied. ‘Now freeze, and hold that for fifteen hours.’

The repeated story of the ‘smile fighter’ seems to be something of a mythical ‘hero’ story symbolizing many service providers wish to stand up for themselves against customers and to not take it anymore. It is, however, uncertain if these stories actually are true or if they are urban legends. Usually the stories involve a colleague or colleague's colleague and the storyteller does not explicitly say he or she witnessed the occurrence. A tour rep told us the following story:

My colleague was at the airport and this man approached him outraged because he and his wife didn’t have seats next to each other on the plane home. He was furious and finally my colleague had enough and said ‘I am sorry, but they don’t pay me enough to listen to this crap’, then he turned and walked away. [Tour rep]

Surprisingly, our study shows that nine out of ten service employees reprove customers who behave badly in one way or another – 27 percent say they actually do it frequently.

Yet another strategy when it comes to dealing with troublesome customers is ‘giving up’ or ‘passing on’, which is illustrated by a waitress in the following section:

You try to talk to the customer in the best possible way but if that doesn’t work I just say ‘I’m doing the best I can, I can’t do more’ [...] If I can’t handle the situation I tell them to wait for the head waiter. I have done the best I can and when I can’t do more I always refer to my boss. That’s the best I can do in those situations.

Hochschild (1983:86) concludes that ‘where the customer is king, unequal exchanges are normal, and from the beginning customer and client assume different rights to feeling and display’ and Abiala (2000) declares that although customers may be arrogant and rather rude, employees are not allowed to be anything but polite. A waitress in our study says, ‘On many occasions you want revenge on customers’; employees can, however, get back at customers without
open confrontation and even without dropping the smile. Such a strategy is put forward by a waiter in Harris and Ogbonna’s (2002:169) study who says:

> Many customers are rude or difficult, not polite like you or I. Getting your own back evens the score. There are lots of things that you do that no one but you will ever know – smaller portions, dodgy wine, a bad beer – all that and you serve it with a smile! Sweet revenge!

An additional example of how to get back at customers ‘invisibly’ without being impolite is to slow down the service handling, for example, when a hotel guest wants to check out. One employee says, ‘if the guest is in a hurry, you slow it right down and drag it right out’ (Harris & Ogbonna 2002:170). Another way is to decline a customer’s request by saying it can not be done although it can:

> If a customer wants to upgrade [get a better room at the hotel] I might say it’s not possible – if the customer has treated me badly. [Tour rep]

In a study on retail in the UK conducted by Retailchoice.com, a shop assistant gives another example of the ‘invisible revenge’:

> When a customer was really rude and paid by credit card I would swipe the card on the detagger so the electronic strip won’t work on their card anymore.

A travel agent in our study says what she might do to get back at customers:

> If I want to take revenge on customers I perceive to be high and mighty, I may ask if they want me to make a seat reservation on the plane. They think I’m being nice asking but it’s an opportunity for me to be a bit mean, telling them ‘oh, the only available seats are in row 19, at the wing.’ I know for a fact it roars like hell there. [...] Or, I might place someone at the back of the plane where the seat can’t be lowered and people queuing up for the toilets, he or she will not get a moment’s peace.

There seems to be many ways for employees to get back at rude, bad-mannered, or annoying customers but the thing is to do it with finesse as a waiter in Harris and Ogbonna’s (2002:170) study explains:

> The trick is to do it in a way that they can’t complain about. I mean, you can’t push it too far but some of them are so stupid that you can talk to them like a four-year-old and they wouldn’t notice. I mean, really putting them down really patronizing, it’s great fun to watch!

Our data shows that a minority (23%) of service employees actually treat customers in a patronizing way and most of those employees behave in such a manner only rarely. It is, however, more common to make fun of customers in
the staff room or in other places where the customer is excluded - 56 percent
generate in such behaviour. The data also reveal that more men than women are
likely to engage in patronizing behaviour or making fun of customers.

An additional strategy of getting back at customers is ‘accidental clumsiness’,
which is described by a restaurant employee in Harris and Ogbonna’s
(2002:171) study this way:

The trick is to get them and then straight away launch into the apologies. I’ve seen it
done thousands of times – burning hot plates into someone’s hands, gravy dipped on
sleeves, drinks spilt on backs, wigs knocked off – that was funny, soups spilt in laps,
you get the idea!

A similar description is given by a waitress in our study who says, ‘A lot of
things have been dropped on guests’ laps, accidentally spilling wine, or
dropping cutlery in someone’s lap when clearing the table.’

Engagement in what can be labelled service sabotage seems to be common
as a hotel supervisor says, ‘any manger who thinks that they can stamp out what
you call service sabotage is just naïve […] all staff that have regular and
prolonged interactions with customers are the same’ (Harris & Ogbonna
2002:171).

A FEW FINAL WORDS

To have a service job includes on the one hand being paid to deliver service to
strangers whom the employees possibly do not care about in any deeper way.
On the other hand, service employees are supposed and convinced to care
about customers in a way that is similar to private relationships. The fact that
relations in a service encounter concern economic transactions and economic
considerations may be disturbing for management, customers and even
employees, therefore economic aspects usually are covered up by an image of
sincere consideration. Many frontline employees work under pressure - they are
supposed be fast and efficient but at the same time conveying a feeling of
personal concern for each customer (Svingstedt 2005). It has been argued that
service work leads to social exhaustion, primarily resulting in social withdrawal
on the employee’s free time (Gustavsson 1997). According to our study, as
many as four out of ten employees with intensive customer contact avoid social
interaction in their spare time.
To hold a service occupation is two fold: it brings job satisfaction but it is strenuous (Ivarsson & Larsson 2008). Researchers with a pro employee perspective argue that service jobs are usually associated with poor working conditions while pro management researchers state the needs, wishes, and demands from the customer. These two research directions are, however, not opposite to each other by nature; they focus on different issues within the service interaction, or the customer encounter. Nevertheless, researchers with different perspectives may differ in ideologies.

In figure 4, we summarize aspects and factors from both the customer side and the employee side of service in what we label the service interaction model. Every customer has certain needs, wishes, and demands regarding the errand for which he or she contacts the organisation. The customer also holds certain service expectations and service preferences (for example if the employee should approach the customers at once or if the employee should let the customer initiate contact). Furthermore, every customer has a personality, which becomes visible in the interaction with the employee; the personality includes ideologies, special interests, communication style, humour and charm, aesthetic presentation, and so forth. All these aspects or features come together in what can be labelled ‘customer composition and self presentation’. The employee also has a similar distinct personality and holds varying beliefs about service (i.e. service intention) that can range from no service, low levels of service, to high level of service. An employee who is not service minded is accused – by pro management researchers and management – of engaging in deviant behaviour (service sabotages), which ultimately leads to miserable service quality, from the customer’s perspective. High service level intention may include, in simplified terms, either surface acting – a fake service performance leading to an acceptable service quality – or deep acting that induces an authentic service performance leading to the desirable service excellence. Human interaction is, however, dynamic and specific ‘customer composition and self presentation’ may influence the employee’s service intention; a customer that the employee finds likeable may alter an employee's possible poor service attitude towards a service minded behaviour the same way a customer that is unpleasant may turn a ‘high’ service intention to low or even no service intention. Gremler and Gwinner (2000) are aware of the difficulties in determining objectively what exactly creates service quality from the customer’s perspective; they suggest that the best and easiest way is through the concept of rapport.
Figure 4: Service interaction model
Rapport is based on personal chemistry, emerges when people ‘klick’ with each other, and may be considered a short cut to service excellence. Gremler and Gwinner believe that rapport can be created in a manufactured way but genuine rapport occurs naturally (compare with love) and can not be easily induced.
REFERENCES


Service Work and Employee Experience of the Service Encounter

Due to the very nature of service work, a vast majority of research has focused on interpersonal aspects. There are mainly two perspectives; the first takes departure from the customers’ point of view and focus on customer satisfaction and business success. The second, rather critical, perspective highlights the employees’ experiences of the service interaction. Our purpose is to combine, summarize, and test – often theoretical and sometimes normative – proposals and statements from both these perspectives.

The empirical data is derived from (a) a questionnaire to a random sample of 2000 Swedish employees with daily customer/client contact in their work, and (b) in-depth interviews with 21 employees, working as shop assistants, receptionists, travel agents etc.

The study covers areas such as routinization; superiority and subordination; customer identification; rapport; aesthetic labour; the use of humour, charm and flirt; and the dealing with troublesome or rude customers. Our research shows how service encounters are a source of well-being, satisfaction, and commercial success, as well as a source of control and stress. The employees have to suppress their own feelings; they lie to customers, and are often mistreated. As many as half of the employees state that they regularly have to deal with troublesome or rude customers. This situation is even worse for women.