

Don't criticize your employees in front of consumers: It's bad for business

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When employees are rude to one another, it creates a negative impression that affects consumer judgments of the company, according to new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Christine Porath, Debbie MacInnis, and Valerie Folkes (all University of Southern California) conducted several studies of employee-employee incivility and found that consumers frequently witnessed incidents of [employees](#) behaving badly toward each other.

"Employee incivility was reported across a variety of industries, including restaurants, banks, government offices, gyms, retail stores, universities, airlines, and entertainment venues," the authors write.

"Approximately 40 percent reported witnessing an act of employee incivility at least once per month."

Across four studies, the authors found that consumers witnessing acts of employee incivility among employees is extremely detrimental to companies. "It induces consumer anger and causes consumers to make broad and negative conclusions (generalizations) about the firm as a whole, other employees who work there, and expectations about future encounters with the firm; conclusions that go well beyond the uncivil incident."

Surprisingly, these negative responses extended even to cases when the uncivil employee was trying to help the customer by rectifying a delay in service delivery.

The authors suggest ways for corporations to promote employee civility. "Several methods include selecting for and training in civility, setting zero-tolerance expectations, and reprimanding incivility before it festers," the authors write.

"Our findings suggest one reason why training in the treatment of customers and employees enhances the bottom line—because of its impact on customer behavior," the authors conclude.

More information: Journal of Consumer Research: August 2010. A preprint of this article can be found at journals.uchicago.edu/jcr

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