

Customers less tolerant of employee rudeness than incompetence

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Rude behavior among employees can negatively affect consumer perceptions -- even when the incivility isn't directed at the customer, reveals new research from the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business.

Across a range of industries, including restaurants, banks, government offices, retail stores and universities, consumers frequently report seeing employees behaving badly toward other employees, including derogatory comments or inappropriate gestures.

"These findings underscore the need for organizations to promote [employee](#) civility," said Deborah MacInnis, Professor of Business Administration at the USC Marshall School of Business and Vice Dean for Research and Strategy. "Training employees to treat one another well enhances the bottom line because of its impact on [customer](#) behavior."

Across four studies appearing the August 2010 issue of the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), MacInnis and co-authors Christine Porath, former Assistant Professor of Management and Organization at USC Marshall and Assistant Professor of Management at Georgetown University, and Valerie Folkes, USC Associates Chair in Business Administration and Professor of Marketing at USC Marshall, examined how consumers witnessing acts of employee incivility may extend their experiences to more general feelings about the company.

They found that people witnessing employee incivility -- in this case, a

store manager calling an employee an "idiot" -- were faster to jump to negative conclusions about the company than those who witnessed employee incompetence.

Surprisingly, the researchers found that customers turned against the company even in instances when the rude employee was trying to help the customer. In one of the studies, people who had to wait several minutes as an employee gossiped on the phone still formed [negative impressions](#) of the company when the employee was reprimanded rudely by another employee in front of them.

"Whereas one might anticipate that incivility directed at consumers has extremely negative effect, we show that consumers are also negatively affected when they are mere observers of incivility between employees," the authors write.

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."

More information: Christine Porath, Debbie MacInnis, and Valerie Folkes. "Witnessing Incivility among Employees: Effects on Consumer Anger and Negative Inferences about Companies." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2010.

Provided by University of Southern California

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