

How do consumers react when friends provide poor service in a business arrangement?

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When your friend is a service provider, things can get complicated. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, a problem can lead to feelings of betrayal or empathy, depending on the circumstances.

"Imagine that you are planning to celebrate your birthday at your favorite restaurant. You ask the owner to hold a sea-view table for you and he indicates that he will try to do so. When you arrive at the restaurant, however, he tells you that all of the sea-view tables have been taken. What would your reaction be?" write authors Lisa C. Wan (Lingnan University), Michael K. Hui, and Robert S. Wyer (Chinese University of Hong Kong).

The answer seems to depend on whether the owner is a friend or a business associate. "There is a common belief that friends are often tolerant of one another's transgressions," the authors write. "Surprisingly, our research indicates that friendship does not always mitigate negative reactions to a service failure."

The researchers found that when consumers focus their attention on the provider's [obligation](#) to respond to their needs, they react more negatively to a service failure when they are friends rather than business associates. "When their attention is drawn to their own obligation in the relationship, however, the reverse is true."

In four experiments, the authors found that when participants considered the situation from the provider's perspective and kept in mind their own obligations, they had a higher tolerance for others' failure to respond.

The study sheds light on an apparent contradiction in previous research. Some studies have suggested that friendships can mitigate the consequences of a service failure; whereas others have found the reverse. "These discrepant findings may have resulted from differences in the extent to which participants were disposed to focus on their own obligations or others' obligations in the conditions that were investigated," the authors write.

"Although individuals in [friendships](#) are typically portrayed as caring and understanding when their partners make mistakes, this observation ignores the fact that individuals in such relationships also expect their partners to be concerned about them," the authors conclude.

More information: Lisa C. Wan, Michael K. Hui, and Robert S. Wyer. "The Role of Relationship Norms in Responses to Service Failures." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2011 (published online February 4, 2011). Further information: ejcr.org

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