

Rude employee behavior quietly sabotages the bottom line

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Insensitive, disrespectful or rude behavior by employees is rampant in US workplaces, yet consumers fail to report the offending workers and instead take their business elsewhere, researchers report in the latest edition of the *Journal of Service Research*.

Approximately one-third of consumers surveyed reported they're treated rudely by an employee on an average of once a month and that these and other episodes of uncivil worker [behavior](#) make them less likely to patronize those businesses.

Yet customers rarely report such behavior to employee supervisors, ensuring a relentless cycle of poor employee behavior that leaves consumers angry and frustrated and saps businesses of [customer loyalty](#), return business and profits, according to researchers from the University of Southern California and Georgetown University.

Workplace incivility includes a range of behaviors, prompting the researchers to study the prevalence of incidents where customers witness an employee behaving uncivilly, the effects on consumers of witnessing such behavior and the subsequent level of [anger](#) and desire to hold employees accountable for their actions.

The team surveyed 244 consumers and found that incivility is widespread. Consumers recalled incidents involving an uncivil employee in many industries, and particularly in [restaurants](#) and retailing. Uncivil outbursts, as well as rude behavior directed at customers and other

employees were in some cases witnessed once a month by approximately one-third of the survey participants.

Furthermore, managers may not be aware of how frequently their customers witness an employee behaving uncivilly because consumers seldom report the behavior to employers – although a majority of the respondents went home and told friends and family members about the incident. Without reports, managers are unable to address the issue with employees.

The study found that witnessing employee incivility makes customers angry and creates desires to "get back" at the perpetrator and the firm. Customers are less likely to repurchase from the firm and express less interest in learning about the firm's new services. For managers who are made aware of the offending behavior, their own harsh treatment of the employee can also prompt negative reactions from [consumers](#).

"Regardless of the perpetrator or the reason, witnessing incivility scalds customer relationships and depletes the bottom line," report the co-authors, Georgetown University Assistant Professor of Management Christine Porath and USC Professors of Business Administration and Marketing Debbie MacInnis and Valerie S. Folkes.

The best response is a simple apology, which researchers found was a just and proper response from both the employee and the supervisor. But the preferred solution is the establishment of training programs that foster [employee](#) civility in order to prevent harmful outbursts.

Provided by Boston College

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