

Customer service is an emotional experience

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You can probably recall a customer service experience that left you feeling good. A recent study has shown not only that positive emotion from sales staff is contagious to a customer, but that a satisfied customer also improves the salesperson's mood. This research is now available in *Human Relations*.

Sandra Kiffin-Petersen, and Geoffrey Soutar from University of Western Australia and Steven Murphy from Carlton University, Canada used a qualitative diary study with 276 sales employees to shed light on the sales experience from the employees' perspective. In psychology, 'affect' is the experience of feeling or emotion. We often feel emotions in response to specific events, particularly social interactions. Affective events theory (AET) suggests that a [salesperson](#)'s thoughts about how they rate their interaction with a [customer](#) (appraisal) will then help determine the emotions they feel. Until now, studies of how an individual's positive emotion appraisals fluctuate in real life, or organizational settings, have been thin on the ground.

Data from employees' [diary entries](#) that outlined their daily interactions with customers, recorded 874 positive events over a five day period. Helping customers to solve their problem was most likely to trigger positive emotions. The data and resulting model revealed that how employees configured event appraisals could be used to predict their emotions:

- Problem solving events where the employee felt the outcome was

a result of his/her own intention (self-agency) and personal mastery elicited satisfaction;

- Recognition for service events with the appraisal configuration of self-agency and enhanced ego-identity led to pride;
- Pleasant customer events with the appraisal configuration of other-agency and positive encounter generated happiness and relaxation;
- Deal-making events where the employee felt the outcome was a result of his/her own intention (self-agency) and goal achievement elicited excitement and relief.

Differences in of various events by the same individual also helped to explain why some initially negative events may ultimately become a positive experience for an employee. When employees believed they had the ability and authority to solve complex, and sometimes ambiguous, customer service needs, an initial negative feeling (usually emanating from the customer's mood, or complexity of the problem), was shown to potentially lead to a positive affective state (i.e. relief, satisfaction and excitement).

Emotions were also shown to be contagious – so as well as a great sales interaction making for a happy customer, it was also demonstrated that customer happiness can 'rub off' on the [sales staff](#) serving them.

"The customer interaction may need to be recast in the context of a dynamic interplay between salespersons and customers, where the affective state of each may influence the other," the authors of the study suggest.

Cognitive appraisal theory assumes that the interpretation of events creates the felt emotion, rather than the event itself. The person's appraisal of the event is therefore, theoretically distinct from the event and the feelings that they have experienced. How much a person feels

personally responsible for the event feeds into appraisals that determine how good they feel.

Few studies have investigated how on-the-job interactions elicit affective reactions in employees working within the service industries. Studies of the appraisal process within a given individual are important because they help explain why people may experience different emotions in response to the same event, an explanation currently not provided by AET.

AET attempts to explain why a person's [emotional](#) state fluctuates, but does not explain how particular [events](#) trigger specific positive emotions. The authors have now created a new model, which incorporates cognitive appraisal theory and the control-value theory of achievement emotions within an AET framework.

"For employees in our sample, taking personal responsibility for the customer's problem and using their skills and abilities allowed them to be more effective problem solvers," says Sandra Kiffin-Peterson. "Solving a customer's problem may be a positive experience because it enhances an employee's sense of competence and achievement, as well as their self-esteem."

Organizational experts are increasingly accepting that positive affect has important implications for optimal health and well-being, with implications being shown for how organizations think about [customer service](#) and quality.

More information: "The problem-solving service worker: Appraisal mechanisms and positive affective experiences during customer interactions" by Sandra Kiffin-Petersen, Steven A Murphy, Geoffrey Soutar, published September 2012 in *Human Relations*.

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