

Global companies beware: Rude customer treatment depends on culture

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A new UBC study reveals that North American service workers are more likely to sabotage rude customers, while Chinese react by disengaging from customer service altogether.

"Our research shows that culture plays a significant role in how frontline workers deal with [customer](#) abuse," says UBC Sauder School of Business Professor Daniel Skarlicki, a co-author of the study.

"In North America, employees tend to retaliate against offensive customers – doing things like giving bad directions or serving cold food. In China, workers are more likely to reduce the general quality of service they provide to all customers – nasty or nice."

In a paper to be published in the journal *Personnel Psychology*, Skarlicki and former Sauder PhD student Ruodan Shao studied how frontline employees at a luxury hotel with locations in Vancouver and Beijing reacted to customer mistreatment.

Although the level of abuse was consistent in both locations, North Americans resorted 20 per cent more often to sabotage to get revenge. Abused [Chinese workers](#) were 19 per cent more likely to feel a lack of enthusiasm in their jobs, responding negatively to statements like, "I voluntarily assist guests even if it means going beyond job requirements."

"North Americans take a surgical approach to abuse, zeroing in on

individuals who mistreated them," says Skarlicki, noting that managers must be mindful of these [cultural differences](#) when expanding operations across the Pacific. "Chinese don't blame the transgressor. They blame the system – the company or customers they serve."

Skarlicki says the implications are clear: "When service-oriented companies go global, they need to heighten their sensitivity to how culture in a new market can influence the performance of frontline staff and tailor their customer service operations accordingly."

Backgrounder:

For the study, the researchers held focus groups with small groups of hotel employees in Beijing and Vancouver to identify a set of common abusive situations and methods workers used to sabotage ill-mannered guests.

Using this information, they conducted a series of surveys with more than 200 employees – 132 in Beijing and 82 in Vancouver. Participants reported the frequency they experienced abuse, the frequency of customer-directed sabotage as a result of customer abuse, and the level to which people felt an affinity toward their jobs.

Skarlicki notes that the study is responding to the ongoing trend of North American service industries expanding operations to China and increasingly Chinese companies doing likewise in North America.

He says the differing cultural responses observed in the study are in line with established traits of the two cultures, with North Americans tending to be more individualistic and Chinese more collectivistic.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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