

# Customer feedback helps spur employee creativity

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Empowering customers to give feedback to service providers can have a key motivational impact on employees' creativity and customer satisfaction, two important service outcomes, according to a new study by management experts at Rice University, the University of Connecticut, the University of Maryland, the University of Minnesota and National Taiwan University.

"The findings suggest that service creativity is a powerful avenue through which [customer satisfaction](#) can be achieved," said study co-author Jing Zhou, the Houston Endowment Professor of Management at

Rice's Jones Graduate School of Business. "Service creativity allows [employees](#) to delight customers in unusual ways or solve problems that existing protocol falls short of addressing."

The research, which will be published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, was based on a multilevel analysis of multisource survey data from 380 hairstylists matched with 3,550 customers in 118 hair salons belonging to a large salon chain in Taiwan. Although the study was conducted in the beauty service industry, the theoretical framework the authors developed addresses fundamental psychological processes that are universal for individual employees, authors said.

The study's findings demonstrate that customers might present a unique opportunity for service organizations to manage encounters between customers and employees, Zhou said. "Our results suggest that organizations can benefit from strategically marketing to customers in order to cue them toward empowering their service provider. For example, managers should look for chances to foster customers' willingness to empower employees by helping customers establish confidence in the employees and focusing on the prospect of superior performance."

By helping customers realize that they can promote new service ideas or solutions and other positive service outcomes through behaviors such as expressing confidence in service employees and consulting employees for their opinions, managers can facilitate employee creativity through customers, Zhou said.

The research also indicates that managers can capitalize on the strategic advantage that external customers can provide by empowering their employees.

"Because front-line employees engage in contact with customers on a

daily basis, they may have a better sense in terms of the issues that customers are concerned about the most and how to solve these problems in a novel and practical way," Zhou said. "As a result, empowering employees—rather than closely monitoring and controlling them—may be a more effective way to enable employees to provide satisfying service. Specifically, our findings suggest that empowering leadership helped service employees take advantage of customer empowerment by encouraging them to self-regulate their work-related behavior; they were able to express their promotion focus in the form of generating novel and useful solutions."

The authors selected hair salons as the research context for two reasons. First, generating novel and appropriate hairstyles to meet various customer needs is one of the most basic and important requirements for stylists. Thus, hair salons constitute a particularly fitting context for studying service creativity, Zhou said. Second, the interaction between a customer and a stylist usually lasts long enough (more than 30 minutes) for the stylist to perceive a customer's behaviors and for the customer to observe the stylist's creative performance.

Provided by Rice University

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