

# Witnessing uncivil behavior

June 18 2019, by Becky Kramer

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In the era when a cell phone video can go viral on social media, it's critical for employees to understand the potential audience watching their interactions with customers. Credit: WSU

Suppose you're at a nice restaurant celebrating your anniversary. When a customer at a nearby table complains that it's taking too long to get his meal, you and your spouse overhear the server's brusque response.

Would the server's behavior prompt you to leave a smaller tip for your own meal?

When people witness poor [customer](#) service, studies indicate they want to seek revenge against the employee, even though they weren't directly affected.

New research out of Washington State University expands on the previous studies, looking at what happens when a manager steps in with an apology and how tips are affected.

A manager's intervention can help reduce witnesses' hostility toward the company or brand, reestablishing trust in the firm and preventing the loss of future business, the WSU study found. However, antagonism toward the individual employee remained. Bystanders still punished the employee through lower tips, according to the research.

## **Social media expands potential audience**

The study has important takeaways, said Ismail Karabas, an assistant professor of marketing at Murray State University who worked on the research for his WSU doctoral dissertation.

"Employees should be aware that their audience is much larger than the customer they're focused on," Karabas said. "A [negative response](#) is likely to result in lower tips—not only from the disgruntled customer, but from others who witnessed the exchange."

In the era when a [cell phone video](#) can go viral on social media, it's critical for employees to understand the potential audience watching their interactions with customers, Karabas said.

"When I present this research, I often use the 2017 example of the

passenger being dragged off the overbooked United Airlines flight," he said. "The bystanders aren't just the people who were physically present, but all the people who can watch the video online. With the growth in [social media](#), our research becomes much more critical to companies and front-line employees."

## **Fairness important to customers' perceptions**

Fairness is an important aspect of [employee](#)-customer interactions, said Jeff Joireman, professor of marketing at WSU's Carson College of Business. Customers' [response](#) to service often hinges on whether they think they or others were treated fairly, he said.

But the WSU research also showed that customers didn't differentiate between a neutral response to a complaint and a positive response. In the scenario where the customer complained about slow service, researchers tested several responses. Some servers apologized while promising to fix the problem, while others just said they'd fix it. Customers reacted well in both instances.

"You don't have to bend over backwards to appease customers—you only have to correct the problem," according to Joireman, who said that's an important finding to help prevent burnout in front-line employees.

**More information:** Ismail Karabas et al, Why and when witnessing uncivil behavior leads observers to punish frontline employees and leave the firm, *International Journal of Hospitality Management* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2019.03.019](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2019.03.019)

Provided by Washington State University

Citation: Witnessing uncivil behavior (2019, June 18) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-06-witnessing-uncivil-behavior.html>

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