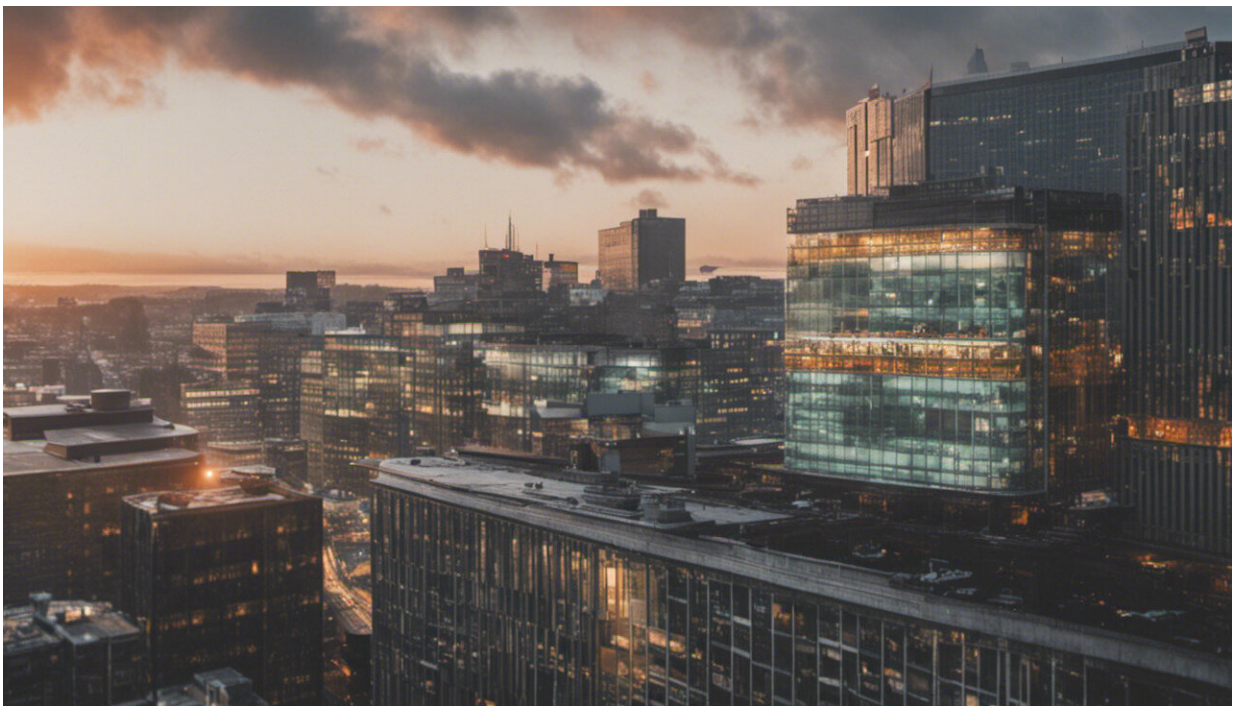


The rise of the irate customer: Post-pandemic rudeness, and the importance of rediscovering patience

March 14 2023, by Laura Hambley and Madeline Springle



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If you find yourself being more impatient than ever before when interacting with people in customer service roles—or if you've noticed other people having a shorter fuse and snapping more quickly—you're not alone.

[Recent news stories](#) have shed light on how [toxic customers](#) are causing employees to reach their breaking point. The resulting epidemic of "[quiet quitting](#)" and resignations is further fueled by a post-pandemic labor shortage in the service/hospitality industry.

The shortage of staff perpetuates this cycle of frustration, with remaining employees experiencing the further impatience and uncontrolled emotional reactions of customers. How can we break this unhealthy cycle?

Understanding the underlying causes of our decreased patience, and why our emotions are heightened, is essential.

Perpetuating a cycle of frustration

First, as a society, the pace of change and the speed with which we get information and answers has rapidly increased. We want everything faster: answers, service and our problems to be solved. This ultimately sets up challenging, and sometimes unrealistic, [expectations for those who are trying to serve us](#).

Furthermore, the widespread transition to remote work during the pandemic resulted in reduced face-to-face interaction. And with a decrease in this time spent with our fellow humans, it has likely been [more difficult to develop empathy and patience](#). Too much [screen time](#) may have caused "keyboard courage" to bleed into our day-to-day conversations, leaving us more abrupt and [even rude in our communications](#).

Another cause of heightened emotions is the overall challenges people in the world are facing, including polarization, war, the underlying stress of inflation, supply chain issues or looming [economic uncertainty](#). All of these factors are pushing people to their limits and resulting in an

[increase in burnout](#), frustration, and impatience in their interactions with others.

[Uncertainty breeds stress](#), and both are at [all-time high levels](#), as evidenced by the American Psychological Association [2021 Stress in America Survey](#) and more recent [Gallup polls](#).

Stress and burnout

The field of [industrial-organizational psychology](#) seeks to apply psychological concepts and theories to the workplace to enhance the well-being of employees, leaders and organizations. As industrial-organizational researchers working in applied settings, we strive to bring best practices to the workplace.

When it comes to this topic of heightened emotions, and decreased patience and tolerance of customer service post-pandemic, we know that a greater understanding and awareness are key to better mitigating our behaviors and their impact.

Decreased patience and increased emotionality are real problems for service-based organizations and employees, along with the quiet quitting, "great resignation" and ensuing shortage of talent they fuel. The impact on those who remain in customer service roles is harmful, increasing their stress and [potential for burnout](#) due to increased work demands.

Impatient, rude and abrupt behavior is not only exhausting but unsustainable for workers' emotional health and well-being. It's also been found that when employees suppress their emotions and are forced to engage with complaining customers, this is related to [an increase in depression and anxiety symptoms](#).

Employees feel that they are [punching bags](#) for customers' anxieties and

frustrations, which has been found to [affect employees' internal self-worth](#). And what's worse is that employees believe that [bad behavior](#) from customers is now a much more [common occurrence](#).

A poll conducted by [The Institute of Customer Service](#) of 1,000 customer service workers and 1,000 members of the public, found that half of the employees in customer service industries experienced increased hostility from customers during the early onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly problematic, as according to [Gallup's Trends that Leaders Need to Navigate in 2023](#), quiet quitting in the workplace ultimately threatens customer retention.

Implications for businesses

The implications of this are severe. Not only are [business owners](#) struggling to find employees to fill these roles, but customer service employees are [refusing to re-enter the workplace](#). This lack of service workers further feeds into supply chain issues, an increase in rising costs of products, and general fear and uncertainty.

In another survey analyzing the [state of health and well-being](#) of contact center employees, research indicated that 96 percent of employees felt acute stress on a weekly basis. Employees do not feel like they are being treated with the [respect and dignity that they deserve](#), and the toll is too much for them.

Although it seems that these toxic customer behaviors are here to stay, this trajectory is reversible. This new pattern of behavior must change, otherwise, we risk not having a customer service industry. In this chicken-or-egg situation, customers need more compassion and empathy for employees, while [employees](#) must recognize that customers may be lashing out for reasons outside of their scope.

Here are some practical strategies to consider:

Reversing this important trend requires first looking at our own behaviors as customers and how we may be inadvertently contributing to this problem. Where can we soften our approaches, and in turn, positively influence others around us?

1. Take the challenge of smiling at the person (for example, a cashier, teller or server), asking how they are doing and genuinely making a human connection with them.
2. When you feel impatient or frustrated, put yourself in the other person's shoes. Taking a moment to pause, breathe and give them the benefit of the doubt. Most [customer](#) service people want to help you, but they are likely dealing with high pressure and a lack of resources and support. Kindness towards them goes a long way.
3. Lastly, think about how you would want to be treated. Consider the implications of how your words will impact not only this employee's day, but perhaps their feelings of self-worth. Ask yourself if what you're about to say will have a positive or negative impact, and whether you can potentially bring some hope and optimism into this person's day.

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