Business Horizons (2015) 58, 357—362

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

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MARKETING & TECHNOLOGY

"Yes, and. . .": What improv theater can teach service firms

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KEYWORDS
Customer service;
Service quality;
Improvisation;
Improv;
Service theater

Abstract This installment of Marketing & Technology introduces managers to improvisation—colloquially known as 'improv'—or acting sans pre-planning, as a device for delivering warm, unmechanical service without breaking the training budget. We begin by describing improv, reviewing its history, and covering the rules and guidelines that improv uses. Then we explore some of the ways in which improv has been used in non-theater settings, and we present a number of examples of improv in customer service. We conclude by offering three lessons that improv theater can teach service firms.

1. The promise of service theater

In his landmark article, Ted Levitt (1972) argued that the problem with service firms is, actually, service itself. He contended that service firms shouldn't provide service, but rather be more like efficient factories. Service firms shouldn't solve service problems, they should eliminate them. They should resist the temptation to assign more employees to problematic service situations and instead remove personnel, because employees are usually the source of the problem. Believe it or not—according to Levitt—customers don't want more service, they want less. They want solutions to their problems and more control over the situation, not someone to control it for them.

While Levitt's dictates might seem Orwellian, many changes that have occurred in the 35 years since his article was published—such as self-service gas stations, ATMs, international direct dialing, and airport check-in kiosks—suggest he was right. Indeed, since the mid-1970s, standardizing customer service has become increasingly common in service firms. This approach—whereby employee tasks are simplified, equipment is substituted for human labor, and minimal discretion is allotted to employee decision making—has been touted as a method of achieving efficient, low-cost, and high-volume customer service (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). Viewing it from this perspective, standardization is a method of increasing predictability and developing fail-safe and idiot-proof strategies that allow unmotivated or poorly educated workers to deliver quality service.

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0007-6813/$ — see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2015.02.002

However, simply standardizing customer service systems does not always eliminate problems. Service failures inevitably occur because it is not possible to completely identify and fulfill customer expectations and because uncontrollable factors (e.g., weather) can impact both the customer's experience and satisfaction. In addition, neither customers nor employees are entirely predictable agents, and even fail-safe strategies will occasionally need to address human error or will need to adapt to changing customer preferences (Prahalad & Krishnan, 1999).

In fact, those companies that have invested heavily in standardizing their service delivery are, ironically, highly sensitive to service failures (Hart, Heskett, & Sasser, 1990). The systems companies put in place to standardize their customer service require strict policies and controls, leading to rigid and inflexible customer service operations and a decline in the ability to adapt to the unexpected. As a result, when service failures occur, companies that have standardized their customer service delivery are often unable or unprepared to make exceptions, as doing so requires the flexibility to break rules. As Hart and his colleagues state, when companies with standardized customer service operations engage in service recovery, their efforts often reinforce the customer's initial negative reactions. Customer service representatives trained to respond by the book may be thinking about what they are going to tell the customer next instead of listening to what customers are saying (Hart et al., 1990).

Most service firms are stuck in the murky space between what Schmenner (1986; see also Armstrong, Pitt, & Berthon, 2006) has termed 'service factories' and 'service theaters.' Service factories are those firms in which services are highly standardized and most of the production is done behind the scenes, or in the back office. A service theater is a setting in which the service provided is highly customized and performed in full view of the customer. A major problem for service firms that are either unable to achieve the efficiencies of a true service factory or do not wish to is being able to deliver a level of personal service that comes across as warm and unrehearsed while at the same time not breaking the bank. These firms might not command top-tier prices, pay the salaries that the world's most renowned service providers pay, or invest the massive sums into service training that the most bespoke service firms do, yet they still desire to deliver a level of service that doesn't sound or feel as though it is coming from robots instead of humans. In theater terms, such service firms might not be a major Broadway or West End show, featuring famous stars, yet they can pursue a form of theater that just might have very valuable lessons to teach: service firm executives, meet improv theater.

In this article, we introduce managers to improvisation—hereafter simply referred to as 'improv'—or acting sans pre-planning, as a device for delivering warm, unmechanical service without breaking the training budget. We begin by describing improv, tracing its origins and illustrating the conditions under which improv works well. We then outline the rules and guidelines that improv uses and provides, and show how these can be implemented in service situations utilizing examples. We conclude by listing an agenda for firms to follow in employing improv as part of a customer service strategy.

1.1. Origins of improv theater

The roots of the word *improvisation* are a useful starting point in understanding the concept of improv itself (Weick, 1998). The components of the word include 'proviso,' which means to plan ahead or to do something that is premeditated, while the prefix 'im' means 'the opposite.' Thus, at its core, improvisation means the opposite of planning ahead, or the opposite of taking premeditated action (Weick, 1998).

The origins of improv theater can be traced back to 16th century Italy when a form of theater known as commedia dell'arte all'improviso—or commedia dell'arte, for short—began (Schmitt, 2010). This theater, which is translated as 'a company of professional players of improvisation,' is believed by some to be the first entirely professional form of theater (Schmitt, 2010). For 200 years, commedia dell'arte spread throughout Europe as masked performers playing out improvised scenes. The question as to why the performers in commedia dell'arte chose improvisation rather than scripted performances remains debatable; however, possible answers include better enabling performers to avoid censorship and copycats, circumventing the difficulty of writing scripts in many languages as they traveled throughout Europe, and simply reducing the amount of script that traveling performers had to memorize, thereby skirting memory constraints (Schmitt, 2010).

Modern improv theater was born at the University of Chicago in 1955 when David Shepherd and student Paul Sills formed a troupe of performers known as the Compass Players (Seham, 2001). The Compass Players improvised original works in order to comment comically on current issues, and based their performances on elements from commedia dell'arte. This use of elements from commedia dell'arte ultimately led to the formation of The Second City comedy theater. Thus, Chicago improv—or