



Bad behavior and conflict in retailing spaces: Nine suggestions to ease tensions



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Abstract This article builds on years of work studying territoriality and conflict issues between customers and employees in retail and service settings. The key contribution of this research is to illustrate the bad behaviors and conflicts that take place in retail spaces between customers, between customers and employees, and between employees. Using multi-methods of data collection—critical incident technique, interviews, mystery shoppers, and surveys—the authors outline these bad behaviors and conflicts for managers and offer nine solutions to help retailers handle these behaviors and conflict in retail spaces.

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The human failing I would most like to correct is aggression. It may have had survival advantage in caveman days, to get more food, territory or partner with whom to reproduce, but now it threatens to destroy us all.

— Stephen Hawking (Winter, 2015)

Time and space—time to be alone, space to move about—these may well become the great scarcities of tomorrow.

— Edwin Way Teale (1956)

1. Conflict in the retail environment

As the opening quotes from Stephen Hawking and Edwin Way Teale suggest, aggressive tendencies and a lack of space/privacy are issues we face in present time. This article explores conflict and bad behavior arising from issues such as these in a retail environment. Consider the following scenario:

Maria walks into a grocery store to buy cake mix for a birthday cake she plans to make that evening. She is in a hurry because she must soon pick up her son from school. She quickly walks to the baking supplies aisle and sees that her path is blocked by two women, their carts, and their cavorting children. Maria walks up the adjacent aisle and back down the baking

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aisle only to find an employee stocking the cake mix area. Maria maneuvers around the employee, who seems in no hurry to get out of her way. Sensing that the employee knows what she's after but is not willing to help by moving, Maria crossly asks him to move the cart and products out of her way so she can get the cake mix and pick up her child on time. As she reaches for her cake mix, the employee hands her a different box and says: "Oh, no. You should try *this* cake mix. My wife uses it and she makes the best cakes." Maria gets flushed. She doesn't want that cake mix. She has always used Betty Crocker. Her grandmother used Betty Crocker. Maria tells the employee thanks, but she'd rather stick with her brand. The employee persists by telling Maria about the last cake his wife made for his birthday using 'his' brand and how moist and delicious the cake was. Maria, in a hurry and not wanting to listen to the employee's personal stories, grabs both boxes and leaves the aisle. She dumps the unwanted box at the endcap and rushes to the checkout to stand third in line.

While Maria waits, a woman with a young child gets in line behind her. The child rams his mother's cart into the back of Maria's heels. Maria whirls around to see the woman on her phone, with no regard to Maria's space or the child invading it as he pulls back the cart for round two. As she moves up to next in line, the person in front of her is taking forever and Maria fears she might be late in picking up her son. To Maria's relief, another cash register opens. As next in line, Maria quickly tries to move over, but the cashier waves the woman and child to come be served. Maria is frustrated; she had been waiting longer! Realizing both her patience and time have run out, Maria nestles the cake mix in between some Reese's Cups and Snickers on the candy impulse-buy rack and leaves the store to go pick up her son. She exits, annoyed and frustrated—and without what she originally came for.

As she drives away, Maria wonders how a trip to the store for a single box of cake mix could be such a hassle. Didn't she have the right to the store space over the employee who was stocking the shelves? Didn't the employee know not to push a product or brand onto a customer when the customer didn't ask for an opinion? Weren't there some kind of social norms for checkout areas regarding first

come, first served line cues and personal space?

Maria's story is a common occurrence for many of us. Retail managers need to recognize these conflicts and implement solutions to ease resulting tensions. Many bad behaviors and conflicts occur over territory issues. An employee's territory—including intellectual territory (i.e., area of expertise)—extends beyond his personal space. Likewise, the shopper's territory, and the items she has currently selected, is her personal space. While people agree the territories are different, sometimes the two territories cross on the floor and turf wars and conflicts begin. Our initial research on territoriality focused on closing time issues from customers', employees', and managers' perspectives. Our findings on territoriality around closing time are reported elsewhere (Ashley & Noble, 2014; Noble, Esmark, & Ashley, 2015). However, we found in our research that territorial conflicts and bad behaviors extend to more domains, well beyond just closing time issues. This broader view of conflict and bad behavior between customers and employees is presented here with nine solutions to ease tensions.

We employed a multitude of methodologies over the last several years to understand different facets of conflict and bad behavior in retail settings. These methods included critical incident technique interviews with customers and employees of various retailers; mystery shoppers in stores to identify tensions, conflicts, and outcomes; and surveys of customers. Our findings highlight the conflict and bad behaviors from customers and employees that can arise when shopping. In the next sections we will illustrate these sources of conflict and bad behavior in retail settings, describe the three areas of conflict, and offer nine solutions to ease tension in these situations.

2. Sources of bad behavior and conflict: A brief literature review

Dysfunctional employees and customers can create conflict that impacts other customers, employees, and store sales. A dysfunctional customer acts either on purpose or on accident in a way that disrupts typical function (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). These dysfunctional customers can be loud, selfish, inebriated, and abusive. They can cause conflict with other customers and employees, but can also turn to aggression or violence, which presents serious problems for the retailer. Harris and Reynolds (2003) found that dysfunctional

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