



Service with a smile: Does the type of smile matter?

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ABSTRACT

Service providers have often used the mantra of “service with a smile” as a strategy to engender customer satisfaction. The findings of the current research indicate that a smile alone may not be sufficient in achieving service excellence. Specifically, this work extends prior research suggesting that customers have more positive reactions to Duchenne, or authentic, smiles compared to non-Duchenne, or non-genuine, smiles. Two experimental vignette studies examined the influence of the type of smile a service provider displays (Duchenne vs. non-Duchenne) and gender of the service provider on perceptions of service quality, as well as the Stereotype Content Model dimensions of competence and warmth. The results suggest that the type of smile (Duchenne vs. non-Duchenne) impacts evaluations of service providers in terms of their perceived level of competence, as well as their perceived service quality ratings. Implications for the hiring and training of service providers are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

The interaction between service providers and customers, commonly referred to as the service encounter (Bitner et al., 1990; Suprenant and Solomon, 1987) is an integral component of the service delivery process since the service encounter has a profound impact on customer perceptions of satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1990, 1994; Winsted, 2000). Service encounter satisfaction has been linked to customer loyalty, repatronage intentions, and positive word-of-mouth (Athanasopoulos et al., 2001; Bolton and Lemon, 1999; Zeithaml et al., 1996). In order to provide exceptional customer service, organizations must be keenly aware of customers' wants, needs, and preferences (Bitner et al., 1990; Parasurman et al., 1988). Scholars have recently placed increased attention on nonverbal communication as a means to better understand customer needs and desires (Puccinelli et al., 2010, 2013; Sundaram and Webster, 2000). Nonverbal communication refers to the process whereby one interaction partner displays various nonverbal behaviors (e.g., smiling, interpersonal gaze, posture, etc.) that are then perceived and interpreted by the other interaction partner (Hall, 2009). For instance, when an individual crosses their arms during an interaction it is commonly thought that they are showing resistance to the conversation, or that they are closed off from the topic being discussed. Nonverbal behaviors may reveal important information about an individual's emotional

state, personality, or behavioral intentions (Hall, 2009).

The mantra “service with a smile” has often been used among service providers because smiling is thought to positively impact customer perceptions of the service encounter, as well as perceptions of the overall firm (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008). The service literature has long espoused that service providers should be carefully attuned to customers' nonverbal behavior during a service encounter (Puccinelli et al., 2013; Sundaram and Webster, 2000). However, less research has examined the influence of nonverbal cues displayed by service providers. Nonverbal behaviors displayed by a service provider may reveal information about the emotional state of the service provider, which has been shown to be a main determinant of overall customer satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1990, 1994; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Smith et al., 1999; Winsted, 2000). Here, we propose that the type of smile (Duchenne vs. non-Duchenne) a service provider displays influences customer perceptions of the service provider.

2. Conceptual framework

This research builds upon prior work that elucidates the parameters that surround the impact of smiling on perceptions of service providers' competence, warmth, and customer satisfaction. First, we summarize extant research on smiling in the service domain, then we discuss the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) as a framework to understand evaluations in service settings, and

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finally we discuss the details of our present research. Moving beyond current research in this domain, we also examine the impact that gender of a service provider may have on the aforementioned constructs.

2.1. Smiling

The idea of “service with a smile” is certainly not new to service research (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Bujisic et al., 2013; Kim and Yoon, 2012; Mattila and Enz, 2002; Pugh, 2001; Rafaeli, 1989; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Trougakos et al., 2011; Tsai, 2001). However, much of this research did not take into account the type of smile that was depicted. Ekman and colleagues (Ekman et al., 1990; Frank et al., 1993) stated that there are two types of smiles: Duchenne smiles and non-Duchenne smiles. The Duchenne smile, also known as a genuine, felt, or enjoyment smile, is often said to be a spontaneous reflection of experienced emotion. The Duchenne smile is characterized by activation of the orbicularis oculi (cheek raiser) muscle that makes crow's feet at the outer corner of the eyes coupled with activation of the zygomatic major muscle that extends the mouth into a smile (Ekman et al., 2002). Meanwhile, the non-Duchenne smile, or non-enjoyment, false, or fake smile, lacks the aforementioned eye muscle movement, but still provides the muscle movement that extends the mouth into a smile (Ekman et al., 1990).

A smile may be displayed because one is experiencing genuine joy or happiness (i.e., an authentic smile), but in other cases a smile may be displayed when the expressor is masking negative feelings such as discomfort, dislike, embarrassment, or anxiety (Ansfield, 2007; Keltner, 1995; LaFrance et al., 2003), or when the expressor is following a display rule or norm (i.e., an inauthentic smile; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). Hochschild (1983) suggested that authenticity has become even more important to service interactions with an increased demand for “service with a smile” since savvy customers may have the ability to unconsciously distinguish between authentic versus inauthentic displays of emotion during a service encounter. When a customer interacts with a service provider who authentically displays positive emotion, a customer may feel that the service provider went above and beyond their job expectations in order to provide excellent customer service (Grandey et al., 2005). This falls in line with prior research demonstrating that customers provide higher service quality ratings when interacting with service providers who report being more authentic during the service encounter (Grandey, 2003; Totterdell and Holmann, 2003).

There are distinct differences in smiling behavior based on gender. Women tend to smile more than men (Deutsch, 1990) and women have been argued to be more emotionally expressive than men (Mattila et al., 2003). Therefore, a smiling female service provider may be considered more common than a smiling male service provider. We propose that Duchenne smiling acts as an extra-role behavior for male service providers leading to increased positive perceptions of the service provider; however, the display of a Duchenne smile will not necessarily increase positive perceptions of female service providers since this fits with customer expectations based on prior experience.

In conclusion of our discussion of smiling, one may argue that the relationship between smiling and customer satisfaction plays a somewhat trivial role in the overall understanding of the service encounter; however, we take the same view as Söderlund and Rosengren (2008) and espouse that smiling is a critical sub-component of the larger affective nature of a service encounter, which deserves further attention in psychology and consumer behavior research (Simonson et al., 2001).

2.2. Stereotype Content Model (SCM)

In order to understand the impact that nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling, have on the appraisal of service encounter satisfaction firms need to understand how nonverbal behaviors affect the fundamental ways we interpret service providers. Recent research utilized the Stereotype Content Model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002) as a theoretical framework to better understand service encounter evaluations (Castro et al., 2012). The SCM posits there are two key dimensions involved in evaluation in interpersonal interactions: warmth and competence. Prior research in the service literature suggests that warmth trumps competence in service encounters such that service providers who are perceived to be warm are rated higher on customer service evaluations than service providers who are perceived to be competent (Castro et al., 2012). On the contrary, other researchers have suggested that competence is one of the core dimensions of interaction quality that customers use to evaluate service encounters (Czepiel et al., 1985; Gronroos, 1990). Ideally, firms would want to have service providers who are both competent and warm, but scant research has investigated the various factors that influence both of these dimensions in a service encounter. Wang et al. (2012) utilized service provider smiling as a means to manipulate perceived warmth of sales personnel, while Grandey et al. (2005) examined the influence of smiling on perceived friendliness and task performance of service providers; however, to our knowledge, no prior research has examined the influence of smiling on the constructs of competence and warmth simultaneously. We propose that service provider nonverbal behaviors, specifically smiling, have an impact on perceptions of competence and warmth in customer service settings, which ultimately influences evaluations of customer satisfaction.

The SCM offers deeper insight into the content of the stereotypes held about men and women (Cuddy et al., 2008; Eckes, 2002; Fiske, 2012). Since men are often considered more agentic, they are often perceived as more competent, and because women are considered more communal, they are often perceived as more warm (Cuddy et al., 2008). Research in the SCM literature upholds these findings, as men are typically seen as competent but not warm, and women are seen as warm but not competent (Eckes, 2002; Fiske et al., 2002). However, previous work pertaining to gender and the SCM, suggests perceptions about men and women are malleable based on qualities such as their parenting status, sexuality, and occupation (Cuddy et al., 2004; Eckes, 2002), therefore, various characteristics of the service provider (i.e., their nonverbal behaviors) may influence perceptions of competence and warmth.

3. Study 1

This study is the first attempt, to our knowledge, to experimentally examine the influence of the type of smile a service provider displays (i.e., Duchenne vs. non-Duchenne) and the gender of the salesperson (male vs. female) on the Stereotype Content Model dimensions of competence and warmth. Given prior research on the impact of gender on smiling behavior, perceptions of service workers, and ratings of competence and warmth according to the SCM, we predicted that gender of the service provider would moderate the relationship between the type of smile displayed by a service provider and ratings of competence, warmth, and service quality. Thus, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Building upon Grandey and colleagues' work suggesting that authenticity impacts customer satisfaction ratings, but only when

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