



Idiosyncratic service experiences: When customers desire the extraordinary in a service encounter

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ABSTRACT

For many customers “good” service is not enough to create an experience that warrants telling others. Customers want an extraordinary service experience, but what does that really mean? Through an initial qualitative study, the authors tackle this question and conceptualize a term called Idiosyncratic Service Experience (ISE) to represent the interpersonal aspects that create these unique or special service experiences. ISE is a higher order construct made up of a) perceived employee effort, b) surprise, and c) perceived employee empathy. Further, the authors examine the antecedents and consequences of ISEs in a structural model. The results of our study found that ISEs promoted feelings of delight which lead to a higher tolerance to future failures, decreased price consciousness, and stimulated self-enhancing word-of-mouth. We also explore how exception making or the willingness of an employee to break a service norm influences ISEs and evaluations of delight.

1. Introduction

The sad truth is even “good” service experiences can be easily forgotten. Customers have higher service expectations than in the past, and simply meeting those expectations is not enough to create an experience that is worthy of telling others (Curtin, 2013). For example, if a customer has a dining experience that goes exactly as expected, what motivates the customer to tell others about that specific experience? In such a scenario, where expectations are met, the disconfirmation model would suggest that satisfaction has occurred (Oliver, 1980), but this level of satisfaction was expected prior to the service and provides little incentive to tell others about the service performance. Although simply satisfying experiences may drive some form of repurchase intentions, they may not drive the concepts that are desired by many firms such as commitment and brand love. To create these more passionate customer attitudes and behaviors, it is thought that firms must create stronger emotional reactions than simple satisfaction.

Although it is understood that customers want extraordinary experiences, in reality, they rarely occur. In those instances, when customers do have an extraordinary experience, they are often in disbelief that a service firm would provide a benefit that breaks an expected service norm. Companies such as Four Seasons, Nordstrom, and Zappos do not have books and articles written about them because they provide

“good” service. No, these companies strive for experiences that are so unique that customers are surprised by the lengths the firm will go to make a customer happy. From these companies, it seems that a truly extraordinary service experience is often a direct result of the interpersonal interaction between the frontline employee and the customer, whereby the employee provides something to the customer that other providers will not, cannot, or refuse to do.

There have been numerous articles touting that firms need to deliver extraordinary and customized experiences (Franke, Keinz, & Steger, 2009; Gwinner, Bitner, Brown, & Kumar, 2005; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Wilder, Collier, & Barnes, 2014), but, and unfortunately, there is little to no insight into what an extraordinary service actually means, or how to go about providing one. Classifying an experience as simply “extraordinary” is also problematic in that it overgeneralizes what customers' desire in a service encounter. Customers do not want a service experience that is simply different, they want a unique experience that caters to their specific desires, tastes, and wants (Franke et al., 2009). Thus, we initially undertook a qualitative study to understand these experiences and developed the term “*Idiosyncratic Service Experience*” (ISE) to better understand what customers' desire. An ISE is a perceived unique service experience in which the interpersonal interaction between service provider and customer creates value in an unexpected way to meet the individualized needs of the customer. A key to this definition is that

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an idiosyncratic experience is not based on meeting baseline expectations but on delivering the unexpected. As stated earlier, living up to expectations often results in satisfaction, but, providing an unexpected performance can create an experience that customers want to share.

In order to maximize the managerial contribution of this research, we are exploring the interpersonal aspects of the service encounter that can create these ISE moments for customers. In a service context, employee-customer interactions are often a key factor in how a service is evaluated. Hence, to fully capture this concept, a grounded theory design identifies an ISE as a higher order construct formed by three interpersonal aspects: 1) the perceived effort the employee exhibits in meeting the customer's needs, 2) the ability to surprise customers in the service process, and 3) the perceived empathy exhibited to the customer during the experience. These three concepts represent the essential elements that customers are actively aware of during an ISE.

The focus of this manuscript is to not only understand this unique type of service experience, but also to explore the antecedents and outcomes of ISE. First, we wanted to see how a service provider adapting to the individual customer influenced an ISE. Next, the impact of ISE on one of the highest levels of affect in a service encounter, customer delight, is evaluated. This emotional outcome was chosen as previous research has highlighted the importance of delight in predicting important customer outcomes such as repurchase intentions. For example, Meyer, Barnes, and Friend (2017) found that delight and not satisfaction was significantly related to repurchase intentions. Similarly, Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan (2008) found that delighted customers had higher levels of word of mouth and repurchase intentions in comparison with satisfied customers. Third, the model investigates the impact of customer delight on three dependent variables: self-enhancing word-of-mouth, tolerance for future failures, and price consciousness. Lastly, previous research has shown that making an exception or breaking an internal rule can lead to a positive experience (Brady, Voorhees, & Brusco, 2012). We look to expand on these findings to examine if exception making has a significant influence on ISEs and its impact on customer delight.

The fundamental goal with this research is to increase the understanding of what makes an experience unique in the minds of customers. By understanding the dimensions of an ISE, we not only have a better idea how to create idiosyncratic experiences but also recognize how the lack of these dimensions can make one's service experience ultimately forgettable. Since ISE is not based on preconceived expectations, how does this concept influence evaluations such as delight? As well, is breaking the rules for a customer the best policy to create an ISE or can staying within the stated rules of the service provider still lead to customer delight? Likewise, can an ISE aid in buffering potential negatives such as price increases or future service failures? These questions, and ultimately how managers can create actionable steps to foster ISE in their service environment is the emphasis of this research.

2. Idiosyncratic service experience

Since the early studies in services marketing, customers have noted that they want an encounter that is different. In a seminal article by Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990), the authors found that service encounters that were “truly out-of-the-ordinary” positively influenced the customer. Subsequently, Ostrom and Iacobucci (1995) noted that customers wanted a customized or unique interaction especially with credence services that are hard to initially evaluate. Contrary to focusing on delivering these unique experiences, the field of services marketing gravitated toward understanding service quality which was conceptualized as what customers *should* expect in a service encounter (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

While meeting customers' expectations is a good idea, there was a subtle shift that customers desire more than meeting expectations to have a memorable service encounter. Oliver, Rust, and Varki (1997) state that customers would actually be dissatisfied if the service

delivered simply met the needs of the customer and nothing more. Numerous articles after this started to emphasize that customers desire more in a service encounter than simply meeting expectations (Arnold, Reynolds, Ponder, & Lueg, 2005; Rust & Oliver, 2000). Even popular press books started to emphasize that satisfying customers was not enough to create a memorable experience and that service providers needed to strive for differentiation (Blanchard, 1993). Godin (2003) states that service providers will often settle for providing a “good” service experience when customers would rather have “remarkable” experience. A “good” service experience is one that meets expectations but is not necessarily unique, nor will it necessarily promote word-of-mouth. Focusing on creating memories in a service encounter, academics conceptualized the term “service experience” defined as a service encounter that creates a cognitive and emotional response which result in a mental mark or a memory (Edvardsson, 2005).

While many qualitative studies have encouraged the idea of delivering an out-of-the-ordinary experience to customers, there has been little empirical evidence measuring its effect or even what components are necessary to drive these unique customer experiences. Additionally, the term service experience is so general that the meaning of the construct has been watered down in previous research to represent a simple service interaction (Lim, Kum, & Lee, 2015). Based on this need for more clarity, we have developed the term Idiosyncratic Service Experience (ISE) to represent these unique service encounters in the minds of customers. The construct is formally defined as the perceived unique service experience in which the interpersonal interaction between service provider and customer creates value in an unexpected way to meet the individualized needs of the customer. An ISE is an encounter where the customer believes that the experience was truly different or unique compared to the service norm. As stated earlier, it is not about expectations but delivering the unexpected to foster a unique experience.

Idiosyncratic service experiences differ from prior conceptualizations of related terms such as “extraordinary” or “memorable” service encounters in numerous ways. With extraordinary experiences, Arnould and Price (1993) claim that extraordinary experiences involve an unusual interpersonal encounter, though this encounter does not imply that the individualized needs of the customer are met and relates more toward the idea of newness of an experience. In Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy, the general term “memorable experiences” was used to describe a service performance. This term was used as a mere descriptive of a high quality experience emphasizing that it left a mental mark or one that would not be easily forgotten. Other descriptive terms have labeled experiences remarkable, special, out-of-the-ordinary, or passionate but in each of those instances it is just a descriptive term that is not formally defined or conceptualized. Contrary to these other terms, we wanted to develop a concept that was not just descriptive but was definable. Additionally, we wanted to dissect what encompasses this type of experience to fully capture the concept. Hence, we initially conducted an exploratory investigation to understand what factors are necessary for an ISE to take place.

3. Study 1

In an effort to understand what contributes to an ISE from the customer's perspective, Study 1 employed a critical incident technique (CIT). The CIT was chosen for this qualitative investigation as it has shown to be effective in establishing the proper groundwork for a new exploratory construct (Gremler, 2004), and for providing an in-depth understanding of service encounters (Bitner, 1990). Specifically, respondents were recruited from an online national panel and were monetarily compensated for their participation. Respondents were asked to think of a “unique or one-of-a-kind service encounter” that involved interacting with a service employee. Focusing on positive ISEs, respondents were informed that examples of service recovery (examples were provided to ensure that all understood what a service failure and recovery represented), or free product give-a-ways did not qualify for

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