

# Customer forgiveness following service failures

Jeff Joireman<sup>1</sup>, Yany Grégoire<sup>2</sup> and Thomas M Tripp<sup>3</sup>

Recent research has focused on the conditions under which customers will forgive firms for their misdeeds. Within this context, it is important to recognize that some service failures represent minor issues that occur within routine customer–firm exchange relationships, while others represent severe issues that occur within well-established customer–firm communal relationships. We propose that the construct of ‘customer forgiveness’ becomes more relevant when there is a (1) relational norm violation within a strong customer–firm relationship; (2) severe service failure; (3) failed recovery (double deviation); and (4) a belief that the firm was trying to take advantage of the customer (negative inferred firm motives). Building on these ideas, we outline an integrative model of customer forgiveness in the wake of service failures.

## Addresses

<sup>1</sup> Washington State University, Carson College of Business, Pullman, WA 99164-4730, USA

<sup>2</sup> HEC Montréal, 3000, Chemin de la Côte Sainte-Catherine, Montreal, Quebec, H3T 2A7 Canada

<sup>3</sup> Washington State University, Carson College of Business, 14204 NE Salmon Creek Avenue, Vancouver, WA 98686-9600, USA

Corresponding author: Joireman, Jeff ([joireman@wsu.edu](mailto:joireman@wsu.edu))

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Imagine two customers at an upscale restaurant. A first-time customer orders hot soup. When the food is delivered, the soup is cold. The customer asks the waiter to bring a new bowl of hot soup and the waiter does so promptly. The second customer, a long-time patron, also orders hot soup. When the food is delivered, the soup is cold and the waiter spills some soup on the customer. When the customer asks the waiter to bring a new bowl of soup and a towel, the waiter reluctantly agrees. After 30 min, the waiter returns with a lukewarm bowl of soup and a dirty dishrag and says ‘I hope you’re happy. This is coming out of my tip jar.’

Which customer is more likely to forgive the restaurant? Intuitively, the answer seems obvious: the first customer, as the service failure was not severe and the restaurant

recovered quickly. While the first customer *is* more likely to be *satisfied*, we argue the second customer is more likely to engage in a process that could eventually lead to *forgiveness*. This assertion underscores a central point of this paper: customer forgiveness is a process that is more relevant under certain, well-specified conditions. A first-time customer who receives cold soup may be dissatisfied, but as long as this situation is quickly resolved, a high level of anger and desire for revenge seem unlikely. Here, forgiveness is not especially relevant. In contrast, a long-time customer who receives cold soup, a soup stain on her shirt, and a terrible recovery, is likely to experience extreme anger and a desire for revenge. In this situation, forgiveness *is* relevant; given enough time and under the right conditions, the customer may start forgiving. Restated, service failures do not, *ipso facto*, involve the customer forgiveness process. At a minimum, for customer forgiveness to be relevant, there must exist a strong customer–firm relationship. Customer forgiveness then becomes increasingly relevant as the service failure, recovery, and inferred firm motives become more negative.

To highlight when customer forgiveness is a relevant process following service failures, we distinguish between: a) routine service failures involving simple dissatisfaction and straightforward recoveries, and b) more severe failures involving highly negative cognitions and emotions that make customer forgiveness a *relevant process*. In the former case, customers are likely to have a weak relationship with the firm, view it as more of an exchange relationship, and display a response more akin to ‘first impressions.’ If those first impressions are unfavorable, a customer may simply migrate to greener pastures (exit). In the latter case, customers are likely to have a strong relationship with the firm, and must weigh the current infraction against the benefits they have received (and may expect to receive) in the relationship, making forgiveness a more relevant process. To make a case for this line of reasoning, we first define forgiveness and consider when forgiveness is a more or less relevant process in customer–firm interactions. We then review foundational service failure models and articulate an integrative model of customer forgiveness in the wake of service failures.

## Defining customer forgiveness

Forgiveness has been subject to a range of definitions [1•]. What many definitions have in common are reduced anger and obsession with the offender or offense, a willingness to forswear revenge, and enhanced compassion and generosity toward the offender [2–4]. Similarly, we define customer forgiveness as *customers’ internal act of*

*relinquishing anger and the desire to seek revenge against a firm that has caused harm as well as the enhancement of positive emotions and thoughts toward this harm-doing firm [1\*\*].*

### Unique aspects of customer forgiveness

Given its many interpersonal [4–7] and psychological benefits [8–10], consumer researchers have started to investigate forgiveness following service failures [11–15\*]. While customer forgiveness is worthy of study, it is important to recognize differences between the context in which theories of forgiveness have developed and the context characterizing service failures. First, rather than occurring among family members, friends, or coworkers [16], service failures occur between a firm and a customer, who may sometimes have no strong relationship. Second, service failures occur when the service delivery is below a customer's expectations, and many of these situations can be quite minor. This suggests that not all service failures necessitate forgiveness.

### When is forgiveness relevant in customer–firm interactions?

As noted, forgiveness involves reduced anger and revenge, and increased thoughts of reconciliation and goodwill. If anger and desire for revenge are initially low, due to a minor service failure, a weak relationship, or a positive recovery, forgiveness is arguably moot. Accordingly, we propose that *forgiveness theories apply to customer–firm interactions when firms have caused significant psychological or physical harm—by showing self-serving motives, for instance—in the context of a valued relationship*. This assertion identifies four conditions that contribute to a high level of anger and desire for revenge and thus determine when forgiveness is relevant (Table 1). As we explain, these conditions operate as a ‘cascading process’ with contextual variables and aspects of the service failure impacting anger and desire for revenge via the key cognition of perceived negative motives.

#### Condition 1.

Relational Norm Violation (and Betrayal) within a Strong Relationship.

Service failures are especially problematic when they occur in the context of strong relationships that satisfy important needs (e.g., identity or self-esteem). Indeed, following a service failure, a firm's best customers can become its worst enemies (i.e., the ‘love becomes hate effect’; [13\*,17,18]). In part, this is because service failures make customers who have closer relationships with firms feel more betrayed [19,20\*,21\*], and this feeling of betrayal leads them to engage more vividly in anti-corporation actions [22]. In this way, norm violations can be perceived as unfair actions, which motivate revenge and impede forgiveness [23,24]. Customers who have a close relationship with a firm may also be motivated to maintain the relationship [13\*], whereas customers approaching the interaction from an exchange perspective may simply move on to another service provider. In this case, customers may remain indifferent to the firm causing the service failure. In sum, the stronger the customer–firm relationship is, the more customers will feel betrayed after a service failure, and the more relevant customer forgiveness becomes [16].

#### Condition 2.

Severe Service Failure.

A second factor that determines whether forgiveness is relevant is the severity of (i.e., loss associated with) the service failure. Simply stated, the more severe a failure, the more customers will infer that a firm probably had a malicious intent, be angry, and want revenge, believing the firm should have prevented such a situation [25,26\*\*]. Accordingly, severe service failures give rise to the

**Table 1**

**Conditions determining the relevance of foundational and forgiveness theories in explaining customer responses to service failures and double deviations.**

Condition (Dimension)	Relevant theoretical framework	
	Foundational service failure theories	Forgiveness theories
Strength of Customer-Firm Relationship (Condition 1)	Weak	Strong
Nature of Customer-Firm Relationship (Condition 1)	Exchange	Communal
Nature of Violation (Condition 1)	Service Expectation	Relational Norm
Severity of Service Failure (Condition 2)	Low	High
Type of Deviation (Condition 3)	Single Deviation	Double Deviation
Inferred Firm Motives (Condition 4)	Mildly Negative	Highly Negative

*\*Note:* As noted in the text, the dichotomous ‘conditions’ shown here are more accurately conceived of as anchors along a continuous dimension. For example, the strength of a customer–firm relationship can vary from weak to strong, and as it moves toward a stronger relationship, a forgiveness framework becomes more relevant. At a minimum, for customer forgiveness to be relevant, condition 1 must be met (i.e., there is a relational norm violation in the context of a strong, pre-existing, communal relationship). Customer forgiveness becomes even more relevant as the remaining conditions are met.

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