

# When do customers offer firms a “second chance” following a double deviation? The impact of inferred firm motives on customer revenge and reconciliation

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## Abstract

The present research develops and tests a theory explaining how customers respond to failed service recoveries (i.e., double deviations). This work offers three novel and important conclusions. First, inferences about a firm's motive (negative vs. positive) mediate the impact of perceptions of the double deviation (i.e., severity, blame, and fairness) on resulting outcomes (i.e., customer anger, desire for revenge, and desire for reconciliation). Second, when inferred motive is positive, desire for reconciliation overwhelms desire for revenge, leading customers to choose more reparatory than retaliatory behaviors. Third, following a double deviation, firms that both compensate and apologize to customers can change customers' inferred motives from negative to positive, leading customers to desire more reconciliation than revenge, and engage in more reparatory than retaliatory behaviors. These studies demonstrate that, contrary to common wisdom, customers do not *always* respond negatively to a double deviation, and firms still have a “second chance” following a failed recovery.

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## Introduction

Service failures are an unfortunate reality in many service encounters. Flights are delayed, food is under-prepared, and hidden fees are charged on credit cards. Because service failures cannot be fully prevented, scholars have stressed the importance of understanding customers' reactions to a firm's service recovery efforts (Hart et al. 1990; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999). The recovery stage is critically important, because a service failure followed by a failed recovery (i.e., a *double deviation*; Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990) is likely to lead to highly dissatisfied customers (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002)

who attempt revenge (Bechwati and Morrin 2003). Given their costly nature, researchers have been keen to understand the cognitive and emotional processes linking failed recoveries with customer responses such as a desire for revenge and retaliatory behaviors (i.e., negative behaviors that aim to punish and cause inconvenience to a firm for the harm it has caused).

As we review, existing research suggests a basic model of responses to double deviations in which perceptions of the service failure and failed recovery (blame, severity, fairness) lead to anger, desire for revenge, and retaliatory behaviors (Fig. 1, Panel A). While instructive, this model raises three important questions. First, *why* do blame, severity and a lack of fairness lead to anger, desire for revenge and retaliatory behaviors? Second, after a firm “blows” its first chance to win back a customer (by failing at service recovery, and thus committing a double deviation), does the firm get a *second chance* (i.e., an opportunity to recover from the double deviation)? Restated, are desire for revenge and retaliatory behaviors the only possible responses following a double deviation, or might customers, under the right conditions, respond positively and prefer to reconcile with a

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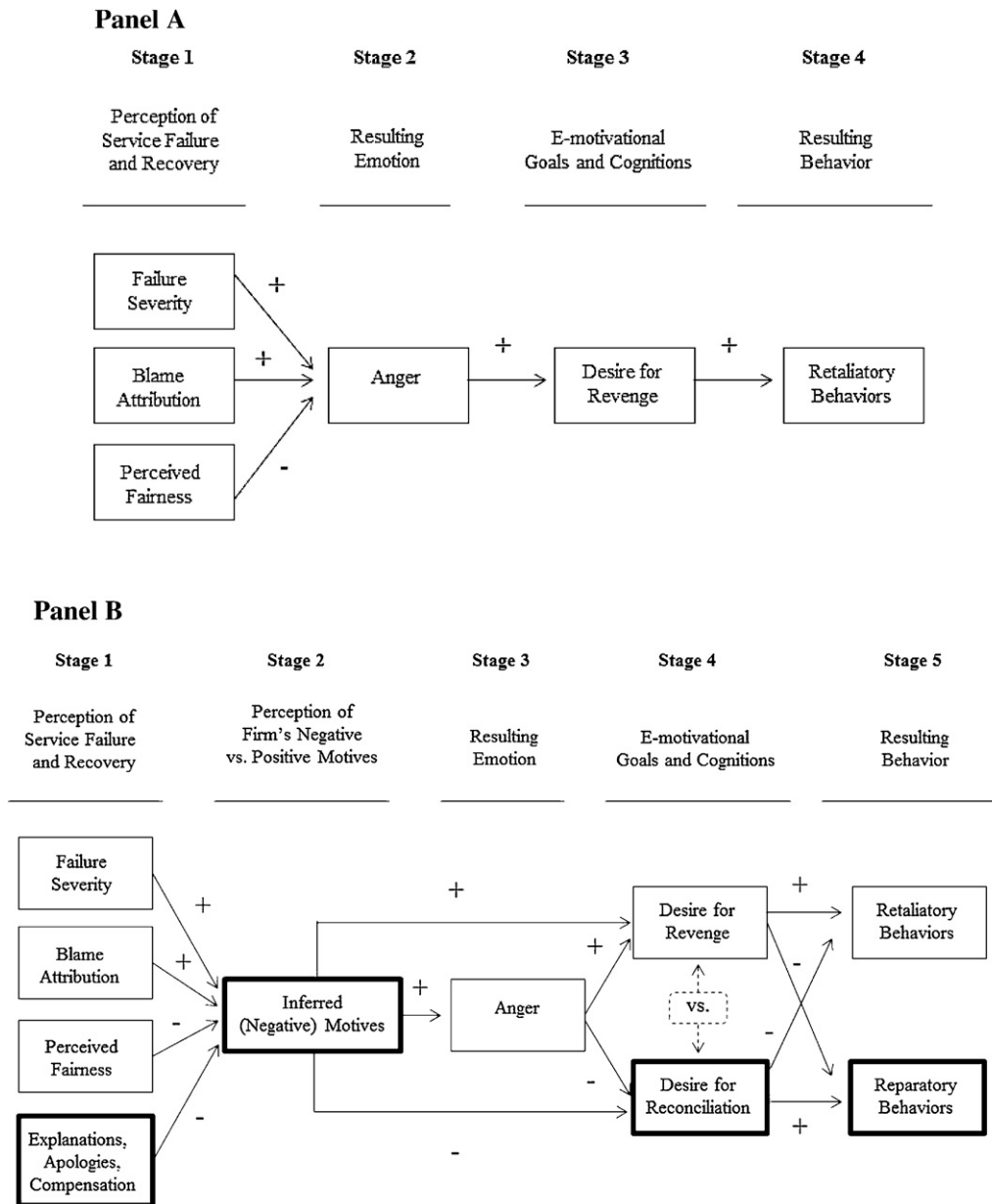


Fig. 1. (Panel A) Basic process model of responses to double deviations. (Panel B) Expanded process model of responses to double deviations.

firm? Finally, what can firms do to encourage a desire for reconciliation, thus encouraging customers to offer the firm a second chance?

To address these questions, we advance an expanded process model of responses to double deviations (Fig. 1, Panel B). Our model improves upon the basic model in three ways, and thus offers three key contributions to the literature on responses to service failures.

First, our model posits that a key determinant of whether customers experience anger and desire revenge (or reconciliation) following double deviations is the valence of their *inferred firm motives*. Specifically, if a firm does not address a customer's complaints following a double deviation, the customer may infer the firm is "greedy" and "uncaring" at his or her expense, and these inferred negative motives, in turn, are likely to lead to

feelings of anger, a desire for revenge, and retaliatory behaviors. Despite inferred firm motives' theoretical and practical relevance, little research has explored how this important construct influences responses to double deviations (cf. Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). Incorporating this key cognition is critical because, as we will see, it determines to a great extent whether a customer responds negatively or positively to a double deviation.

Second, while negative responses to double deviations are common, our model assumes that second chances are still possible, and thus incorporates positive responses, including desire for reconciliation and reparatory behaviors (i.e., constructive behaviors that seek to redress and resolve the problem caused by a firm). To the best of our knowledge, positive responses following a double deviation have been completely unexplored, leaving

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