

# First Impressions of Foreign-Born Frontline Employees: Impact on Customer Participation: An Abstract



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**Abstract** In intercultural service encounters, customers use an employee's accent as a cue to infer their ethnicity, which may unconsciously trigger cultural stereotypes. However, it is still unclear how an employee's accent affects customer behavior. We address this research gap in three studies by examining the influence of employee accent on one important type of behavior, namely customer participation, that is, the degree to which customers are involved in the service process by contributing effort, knowledge, information, and other tangible or intangible resources.

Our findings from Study 1 show that a foreign accent weakens customer participation indirectly through reduced intelligibility, but that cultural distance does not play a role. Consistent with a negativity bias, Study 2 revealed that only an unfavorable employee accent negatively affects customer participation, partially because the service provider is viewed as less attractive and dynamic. In contrast, the effect of a positively valenced accent is non-significant. In Study 3, we found that an unfavorable accent has a negative effect on voluntary customer participation, whereas it increases replaceable participation indirectly through reduced trust. The relationship between trust and replaceable participation is moderated by customers' need for interaction.

Our research, which is among the first to examine an antecedent rather than a consequence of customer participation, leads to important managerial implications for service and retail firms. First, since it is virtually impossible for adult foreigners to ever sound like a native speaker anyway (Flege et al. 1995), the effectiveness of language training with the purpose of eliminating accents is questionable. Instead, service providers should invest in training that increases employees' ability to instill trust and to consistently deliver superior performance in order to maximize customers' service quality perceptions. Second, in order to increase customer evaluations

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of an accented employee's competence, firms could get rid of scripted responses as an acknowledgment to the uniqueness of each service encounter. Third, if a frontline employee with a negatively connoted accent is involved in service delivery, additional information might be given e.g. by handing out a printed checklist with clear instructions in order to increase customer task clarity. Fourth, an accent appears to have detrimental repercussions mainly when it is partly unintelligible. This suggests that speech quality is far more important than whether or not someone speaks with a noticeable accent. Hence, rather than pressurizing employees to get rid of their accent quickly, firms should first encourage them to focus on speech quality in more general terms (voice volume, hesitations, enunciation, and clarity of arguments). Training in this direction could be offered to both native- and foreign-born employees. Finally, training can teach foreign-accented employees how to effectively respond to negative initial impressions due to cultural stereotyping.

**Keywords** Customer participation · Stereotypes · Accent · Intercultural service encounters

References Available Upon Request