

DISSERVICE: A FRAMEWORK OF SOURCES AND SOLUTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, the services marketing literature addresses questions pertaining to improving service processes and customers' experiences, with the broad assumption that the organization and service personnel operate in systems designed to provide levels of service that are adequate or above. From 30 years of focused research, a knowledge base of practices and systems has emerged capable of providing service levels necessary for success, when implemented properly.

Nevertheless, the popular press and social media blogs are replete with examples of services levels so horrible that they could not have emerged from a system designed to deliver service satisfaction. A recent survey revealed that over sixty percent of respondents nationwide had left an establishment in the previous year due to poor service; while the percentage of those opting out of electronically delivered service was even higher (Consumer Reports 2011). Even one extraordinarily bad service experience can destroy a trustful relationship developed over years (Reichheld 1996).

From a statistical process control perspective, service levels beyond minus three standard deviations must have arisen from a "special cause," using Shewhart (1931) and Deming (1986) vernacular, beyond the explanatory power of service quality processes. While marketing professionals have studied and implemented highly defined service systems, little attention has been given to how these extraordinary incidents can be brought under the umbrella of the service system, thereby reducing their damaging impacts. Given the reported frequency of such occurrences, though anecdotal, and because of the potentially devastating impact on important customer outcomes, such as repeat purchasing, loyalty and word-of-mouth, researchers and executives can no longer afford to ignore the devastating impacts of such incidents (cf. Bailine and Dall 2004; Morgan 2009). While service organizations cannot prepare for every eventuality, processes can be put in place to prevent, mitigate and even recover when they happen. Because of this need, academic researchers are called to develop theories, frameworks and research studies for diminishing the deleterious impacts of such disastrous service levels.

We refer to these extraordinarily bad service levels as "disservice." We define disservice as an unhelpful, unkind or harmful act inflicted on a customer that arises from outside the customer service system parameters of the organization. Relying on this definition, we argue that understanding disservice requires research that focuses on the actions of the service tripartite (managers as custodians of service delivery systems, employees as deliverers of service, and customers as receivers of service). More specifically, we explore how such disservice situations can arise in the midst of service management systems designed to produce precisely the opposite outcomes. Finally, we offer a framework for studying disservice that is grounded in services marketing, which is capable of not only identifying sources of disservice but also suggests potential mechanisms to guard against disservice and respond accordingly.

BACKGROUND

Service organizations are in a constant struggle to maintain competitive advantage. Customer loyalty arising from service quality has become a key tool in acquiring market power. Service enhancement programs are now not only a major expense but also a key strategic initiative for marketplace success. When systems designed to deliver high levels of satisfaction fail, disservice has the potential to undermine an organization's goals of customer relationship management and may pose severe long-term consequences for businesses (Harris and Ogbonna 2006). Whether deliberately caused by disgruntled employees or negligently caused by uncontrolled service systems, executives must be cognizant of the causes of service failures.

A theory and research structure to frame the sources of disservice is needed to help managers coordinate their efforts to address and prevent disservice incidents from occurring. Clearly, there are numerous accounts in the media of misbehavior and transgression across various service industries such as travel or hospitality. For example, passengers on a recent flight from India to the UK were stranded for four days in the Vienna Airport until they eventually paid around \$200 each for aviation fuel to complete their journey (\$37,000 in total!). Company representatives organized taxis (at passengers' expense) to reach cashpoints in the city (Time Newsfeed, 2011). In another airline example, a disabled consumer was only able to book a flight using the telephone. The airline charged her extra for this "service," because she was unable to use other more convenient (for the airline) means to reserve a flight. Disturbingly, in every year thousands of service employees across the globe are convicted of assaulting customers. While such acts of extreme disservice receive widespread publicity, it seems likely that the range of disservice incidents includes many incidents that are more mundane but routine transgressions. Harris and Ogbonna (2002) report incidence rates by frontline service staff of around three-quarters regarding deliberate attempts at service sabotage. Moreover, this damage to service delivery is perceived as so common that employees consider their actions to be customary and unremarkable. In this sense, it seems likely that the corrosive effect of everyday disservice may be more damaging to customer-firm relations than occasional incidents of extreme disservice.

Regardless of its nature, disservice may prompt a variety of reactions from the affected customers. Figure 1 displays a range of possible customer responses to disservice from the mild "raised eyebrow" of surprise to retaliatory negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) to the extreme behavior of customer rage. As a discipline, our main focus tends to be the customer. Indeed, research has found increasing levels of customer 'misbehavior' during service encounters (Reynolds and Harris 2008). However, the links between employee action and customer misbehavior have been somewhat neglected. We argue that an understanding of disservice ultimately requires greater appreciation of the role of service employees as the key interface between the organization and its customers. Indeed, studies of service employees from human resource management perspectives suggest that the deferential manner in which managers and customers treat workers may account for disservice (Sturdy, 1998; Korczynski, 2009). Hence, the distinction between victim and perpetrator of service misbehavior requires careful consideration. That is, how many acts of customer deviance are actually understandable reactions to negligent or disrespectful disservice?

FRAMEWORK

The framework depicted in Figure 1 captures the phenomenon of disservice by depicting the ways that disservice is manifested and help examine the various sources of disservice. Disservice can occur through acts that mislead customers, violate customer expectations or societal norms. They may be disrespectful behavior on the part of front-line employees or managers. They could also be poor service delivery process design as in the case of a lack of contingency planning.

Manifestations of disservice can be categorized as *acts of commission* (e.g., rude treatment) or *acts of omission* (e.g., neglect). These can be manifested during *service delivery* or *service recovery* as presented in Table 1.

CONCLUSION

The severe implications of disservice on customer satisfaction and loyalty call for developing safeguards to reduce the incidence of disservice. The sources of the disservice direct attention to possible solutions such as design of the service setting or deploying adequate amount of service providers, hiring and training service enthusiasts, managing customer compatibility, or designing customer-friendly and employee-empowering service processes. Such potential solutions suggest that research regarding disservice should not be restricted to traditional concerns of marketers but should extend to the human resource implications of service and service work. In this regard, existing conceptualizations of service delivery that focus on frontline, customer-contact personnel should be broadened to include the actions of managers who supervise the service effort, and hence may contribute to the incidence of disservice as well.

This manuscript serves as an initial foray into disservice as an area of academic inquiry, both for academically interesting and managerially impactful reasons. Clearly, the services literature must expand to embrace disservice in the nomological network of phenomena addressed. The importance of disservice is too obvious to ignore.

TABLES

Table 1: Types of Disservice

	Acts of Commission	Acts of Omission
Service Delivery	Inappropriate or disrespectful interaction, e.g., rude treatment.	Not providing basic service or resolving routine problems, e.g., inattentive behavior.
Service Recovery	Poor response to customer complaints, e.g. treating customers as if they are lying or attempting to de-fraud the organization.	Failure to address service breakdown, e.g. unwillingness to take action after negligent service.

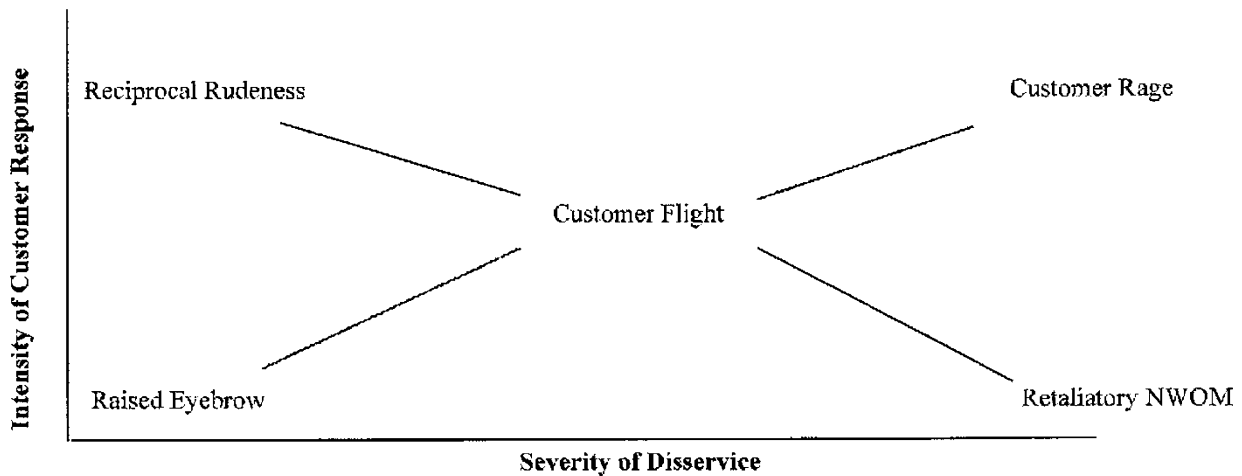
While macro-cultural beliefs, laziness, societal norms, organizational culture, leadership and customer apathy may permit disservice to transpire, acts of disservice themselves are often linked to deliberate organizational policy and/or dysfunctional service performance related to the service setting, the service personnel, service customers, or the service process (Fisk, Grove, and John 2008). [Table 2](#) presents examples of disservice in the framework of these service elements.

Table 2: Sources of Disservice

Service Elements	Description	Disservice Example
Service Setting	The context of the service encounter is incapable of providing service desired at a specific time.	An ATM runs short of cash during a period of peak demand.
Service Personnel	Service personnel fail to comply with service standards and procedures.	A frustrated service representative swears at a demanding customer, telling them to never return.
Service Customers	Organizations fail to address incidents when other customers negatively impact the service experience.	An unruly or loud customer is allowed to destroy others' dining experience when staff fails to intercede.
Service Process	Over-reliance on standard operating procedures that result in rigid, inflexible response to customer needs.	Requiring disabled customers to utilize the same procedures for booking flights as able bodied customers and/or charging an extra fee for delivering this disservice.

FIGURE

Figure 1: Range of Responses to Disservice



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