

# **Gender Differences in the Customer Service Understanding of Frontline Employees**

**Dr Christine Mathies and Marion Burford, University of New South Wales**

## **Abstract**

This study investigates frontline service employees' understanding of good customer service, and explores potential gender differences. Automated text analysis highlighted that males have a more functional outcome-oriented interpretation of customer service, while females focus on the emotional outcomes and actual service interaction. This adds another dimension to our understanding of gender effects in service encounters, where gender is already known to influence customers' quality perceptions and the behaviour of frontline service employees.

Keywords: frontline service employees, gender, good customer service, Leximancer

# **Gender Differences in the Customer Service Understanding of Frontline Employees**

## **Introduction**

Some service industries are traditionally dominated by either male or female frontline service staff. For example, flight attendants today are still predominantly female, a legacy from the 1930s when nurses replaced young boys in the job. Women were considered to be able to best care for customers and 'promote a female presence' to increase the perceived safety of flying ([www.afacwa.org/](http://www.afacwa.org/), 2010).

There are three basic arguments as to why gender stereotypes in service roles should still prevail, and why it is likely that male and female service staff have a different understanding of good customer service. Firstly, there are gender differences in customers' perception of customer service and service quality (e.g., Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993; Mattila, Grandey, & Fisk, 2003; Snipes, Thomson, & Oswald., 2006), partly related to the gender stereotypes in service consumption (e.g., hardware store versus aerobics class), their reactions to service failure and recovery (McColl-Kennedy, Daus, & Sparks, 2003), and their loyalty towards employees (Melnyk, van Osselaer, & Bijmolt, 2009). Secondly, customers may expect – and respond better to – frontline service staff of the 'right' gender. Existing research has investigated how far the gender of the server, and the gender dyad between customer and server, influences perceived service quality and customer satisfaction (Bove & Smith, 2006; Snipes, et al., 2006). Thirdly, male and female frontline service employees react differently to work environments and job characteristics. For example, women tend to experience higher levels of role ambiguity and conflict, and experience more mental stress and emotional labour than males (Babin and Boles, 1998). However, women are generally more satisfied with their work, due to their gender-specific work expectations and understanding of their work (Clark, 1997).

In light of this existing research, we propose that male and female frontline service employees differ in their beliefs of what determines good customer service. This gender-based interpretation of their own work could be the reason why men or women may be more suitable for certain frontline service roles. The current literature on customer service perceptions, however, strongly focuses on the customers' perspective. One notable exception is DiMascio (2010) who found that retail staff have different interpretations of customer service. However, little is known about the effect of the server's gender on their interpretation of customer service.

This paper aims to add to the scarce research on the understanding of customer service held by frontline service employees and explores two research questions: a) What do frontline service employees consider important in providing good customer service? b) Are there any differences in the customer service models of men and women?

## **Literature Review – The service understanding of frontline service employees**

Both conceptual and empirical work on frontline service employees' interpretation of customer service is sparse. One recent study by Di Mascio (2010) identified three generic interpretations of customer service by frontline service employees in the retail sector. According to the study, staff may interpret customer service as (1) an 'act of giving

customers what they ask for, efficiently and courteously', (2) a 'means to accomplishing immediate objectives, such as sales quota', and (3) the 'formation of mutually beneficial relationships with customers through problem-solving.' These interpretations – which are labelled service models – may not be exhaustive, and contextual effects as well as individual characteristics are likely to have an influence on how good service is viewed and delivered.

Existing research on customer service mainly focuses on the service orientation of frontline service employees, and the dimensions of service quality as perceived by the customer. Both strands of research can add to the understanding of frontline employees' service models. Employees' customer service orientation is their willingness and ability to deliver excellent customer service and adjust their service delivery to meet the customer's needs and preferences. In other words, an individual's service orientation (which is distinct from the firm's service orientation) is his or her service related attitudes and behaviours which directly shape the type of customer service they provide (Hogan, Hogan, & Busch, 1984). Service orientation seems to be closely linked to one's interpretation of good customer service. From the customer's point of view, the quality of the service received is most commonly assessed using the five dimensions of service quality established by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). The perceived quality of customer service is a function of the tangible evidence of the service, the reliability of the service outcome, and the responsiveness, assurance and empathy of the service delivery.

Babin and Boles (1998) have researched gender differences in the behaviour of service employees and cite some important underlying factors in the organisational literature. For women, service work is more emotionally exhausting, their work roles are more ambiguous, and the separation of work and non-work tasks is more difficult because they take on greater responsibilities. Work roles often dominate gender roles, but especially in frontline service jobs, gender roles and associated stereotypes continue to reign. Gender stereotypes have been established in research on customers' service perceptions. For example, Fischer et al (1997) and Snipes et al (2006) showed that the gender of the server influences customer satisfaction ratings. In particular, (dis)confirmation of expected gender stereotypes of the server have a (negative) positive influence on customers' service perception. In less stereotyped services, customers tend to form stronger relationships with same-sex servers, a finding that Bove and Smith (2006) could not confirm. Male and female customers also differ in customer satisfaction judgments, in that men put more emphasis on the core service provision, and women value the relationship with the service staff (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993). We therefore presume that similar gender stereotypes also prevail in frontline service staff's interpretation of what entails good customer service.

## **Methodology**

The sample consists of 876 usable responses from frontline service employees who work in over 20 different service industries in Australia. Respondents were recruited through an online panel, and screened to include only those who spend at least 40% of their working time interacting with customers. 44.6% were male and 55.4% female, reflecting the overrepresentation of women in frontline service roles. Frontline service employees were asked to answer the following open-ended question: "What do you think is good customer service?"

We applied automated text analysis using Leximancer (Smith & Humphreys, 2006) to examine underlying themes, i.e. common text elements, in the customer service

understanding of frontline service employees, and to explore gender differences in these common text elements. Leximancer has been used effectively for both conceptual and relational analyses of textual data (Burford, 2008; Luck & Giyanti, 2008; Kattiyapornpong & Nel, 2009)

Two distinct analyses were run. The first looked across all the data for frequently evident words or phrases, called ‘entities’. This was then refined by tagging the text with the respondents’ gender, revealing entities that were common to both and highlighting those that coincided with a particular gender. The second analysis focussed on processing the responses for males and females separately. This gives a picture of the indicative responses within a gender group. In the latter analysis it is important to note that the thesaurus lists generated by Leximancer for each theme or entity are unique to that data file, even if they have been labelled with the same entity name. Results are reported as frequencies of occurrence of common word patterns and through maps showing how these entities relate to other identified concepts.

## Results & Discussion

In the first step of our analysis, we explore the key thematic entities for the overall sample, and then separately for male and female frontline service employees. Table 1 summarises the frequency of occurrence of the entities overall (Panel A - analysis 1) and those associated with gender individually (Panel B - analysis 2).

**Table 1: Overall and gender-specific key entities (in %)**

A - Common constructs within all responses <sup>1</sup> .	1 listening	23.2		6 product	11.4	
	2 happy	21.9		7 polite	10.4	
	3 service	20.0		8 time	10.1	
	4 friendly	16.0		9 satisfied	9.8	
	5 smile	13.3		10 help	9.3	
B - Within the gender subgroups <sup>1</sup> :	Male		Rank ‘Female’	Female		Rank ‘Male’
1	happy	20.6	2	listening	27.2	2
2	listening	13.3	1	happy	23.9	1
3	service	12.6	3	service	23.4	3
4	time	11.3	13	friendly	22.0	12
5	satisfied	10.6	9	smile	16.4	7
6	expectations	10.6	-	polite	13.1	14
7	smile	10.0	5	help	12.6	-
8	product	10.0	10	helpful	12.2	-
9	requirements	8.6	-	satisfied	10.3	5
10	manner	8.0	-	product	10.3	8

<sup>1</sup>Note- Excluding concepts of ‘customer’ and ‘customers’.

As might be expected, the two most common entities were ‘customer’ and ‘customers’, which might be considered to be variations of the same theme. However, an examination of the thesaurus lists for these two entities showed that they represent different underlying themes, and they were therefore not merged into one entity during analysis. There will however be sections of text where both concept labels could co-occur, usually to distinguish between a general approach towards customers versus giving attention to an individual (e.g.,

“I believe the customer is always right. I am always attentive to all our customers [...]” (# 658, female)

‘Listening’, ‘Happy’, and ‘Service’ emerge as the three common key concepts of good customer service for all frontline service employees irrespective of gender. ‘Listening’ can be interpreted as understanding customers’ needs and meeting those needs with the provision of a particular service, therefore making the customer happy. This is illustrated by the following quote: “Knowing your customers needs and wants, making sure they leave satisfied [...], a smiling face and a happy customer who you will see again and again.” (# 672, female). This reconfirms the basic definition of service as a subjective experience of value to the customer (Shostack, 1977).

Outside this common core, there are notable differences between men and women, which correspond to the distinction between the functional and emotional outcomes of customer service proposed by Sandström et al. (2008). Services are a means of reaching end states, and as such fulfil both basic functional qualities, and the need for emotional end states. The emotional component equally contributes to the overall service experience. Grönroos (2000) distinguishes the technical and functional qualities of services, but uses the terminology differently from Sandström and colleagues. Grönroos refers to the technical dimension as the ‘what is being done’ (outcome), while the functional dimension addresses ‘how’ the service is being delivered (process). The results presented in Table 1B suggest that male frontline service employees focus on the service outcome, in particular the functional outcome of service. This is most closely related to DiMascio’s (2010) service model of giving the customer what they ask for, quickly and efficiently.

The male focus on efficiently providing the desired outcome is reflected in these quotes:

“Prompt service, on time for appointments, a happy customer at the end.” (# 97, male)  
“Being available quickly to service client needs; ensuring client's requirements are satisfied.” (# 238, male)

Females, on the other hand, focus on the emotional value of the service encounter, and the manner of service interaction. This service understanding is somewhat similar to relationship aspect of the mutually beneficial service model (Di Mascio, 2010), but does not explicitly highlight its problem solving focus. The following quotes illustrate that women acknowledge the functional service outcome as a prerequisite for a satisfactory service experience, but mainly focus on how this outcome is delivered. For female frontline service staff, it is equally important to achieve an emotional outcome, i.e. a warm service:

“To help customers to the best of my ability, to answer their needs and to provide enthusiastic, helpful, and friendly advice and/or results.” (# 267, female)  
“Being friendly, helpful and listening to a customer’s needs; asking questions to be sure they get the correct product or service.” (# 596, female)  
“Being greeted with a genuine, connected smile and a polite, friendly hello; someone who is interested in you as a customer and providing you with whatever you require in a warm but professional manner.” (# 663, female)

These differences were further explored and confirmed in the second step of our analysis, where gender concept relativities are based on the whole data set. We looked at the tagged concepts to highlight the similarities and differences between the genders (see Figure 1), while the common central themes remain the same. The entities most closely associated with

male responses were ‘satisfied’, ‘time’ and ‘expectation’. The concepts ‘smile’, ‘polite’ and ‘friendly’ were more commonly associated with female frontline service personnel. When the genders are analysed separately (see Table 1B) we notice that ‘requirements’ and ‘manner’ are unique to male responses, while ‘help’ and ‘helpful’ are found only in the female subset. Whilst the concepts generated in project 1 and 2 are not identical, the different analyses help to round out the picture of gender-based responses.

The co-occurrences of the six most frequent entities further confirm our results, which the following example illustrates. For male respondents, interactional facets such as smiling and politeness are a means to an end: “Smile, be polite, being able to answer questions effectively and reach the customers goal as that is my goal” (# 202, male). For females, the same concepts, i.e. ‘smile’ and ‘polite’, are the essence of good customer service: “Serving with a smile and being polite” (# 324, female).

**Figure 1: Gender concept relativities based on all respondents**



## Conclusion

In conclusion, our exploratory study showed that the interpretation of good customer service is influenced by the gender of the frontline service employees. The service models of women and men show obvious differences. For female service staff, the quality of the interaction and service processes are the core of good customer service, while their male counterparts are more outcome focussed and consider customer service mainly as efficient problem solving.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, only a small selection of results could be presented. Further research will report investigations into the effect of other factors on frontline employees' service models, such as work experience, industry, length of customer interaction, and the amount of emotional labour involved in providing customer service.

## References

- Babin, B. J., & Boles, J. S. (1998). Employee behavior in a service environment: A model and test of potential differences between men and women. *Journal of Marketing*, 62(2), 77.
- Bove, L. L., & Smith, D. A. (2006). Relationship Strength Between a Customer and Service Worker -- Does Gender Dyad Matter? *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 27(3), 17 - 34.
- Burford, M. (2008) Utilising Leximancer to characterise selected journals based on abstracts from 2007. ANZMAC Conference Proceedings, Sydney, N.S.W., 1.- 3 Dec.
- Clark, A. E. (1997). Job satisfaction and gender: Why are women so happy at work? [doi: DOI: 10.1016/S0927-5371(97)00010-9]. *Labour Economics*, 4(4), 341-372.
- Di Mascio, R. (2010). The Service Models of Frontline Employees. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(4).
- Fischer, E., Gainer, B., & Bristor, J. (1997). The sex of the service provider: Does it influence perceptions of service quality? [doi: DOI: 10.1016/S0022-4359(97)90023-3]. *Journal of Retailing*, 73(3), 361-382.
- Grönroos, C. (2000). *Service management and marketing: a customer relationship management approach*: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hogan, J., Hogan, R., & Busch, C. M. (1984). How to measure service orientation. [doi: DOI: 10.1037/0021-9010.69.1.167]. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 69(1), 167-173.
- Iacobucci, D., & Ostrom, A. (1993). Gender differences in the impact of core and relational aspects of services on the evaluation of service encounters. [doi: DOI: 10.1016/S1057-7408(08)80017-4]. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2(3), 257-286.
- Kattiyapornpong, U., & Nel, D., (2009). Regional Branding: perspectives of tourists in Australia. ANZMAC Conference Proceedings, Melbourne, Vic., 30 Nov- 2Dec.
- Luck, E., & Giyanti, A., (2009). Green marketing Communities and Blogs: Mapping consumer's attitudes for future sustainable marketing. ANZMAC Conference Proceedings, Melbourne, Vic., 30 Nov- 2Dec.
- Mattila, A. S., Grandey, A. A., & Fisk, G. M. (2003). The interplay of gender and affective tone in service encounter satisfaction. *Journal of Service Research : JSR*, 6(2), 136.
- McColl-Kennedy, J. R., Daus, C. S., & Sparks, B. A. (2003). The role of gender in reactions to service failure and recovery. *Journal of Service Research : JSR*, 6(1), 66.
- Melnik, V., van Osselaer, S. M. J., & Bijmolt, T. H. A. (2009). Are Women More Loyal Customers Than Men? Gender Differences in Loyalty to Firms and Individual Service Providers. [Article]. *Journal of Marketing*, 73(4), 82-96.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., & Berry, L. L. (1988). Servqual: A Multiple-Item Scale For Measuring Consumer Perc. *Journal of Retailing*, 64(1), 12.
- Sandström, S., Edvardsson, B., Kristensson, P., & Magnusson, P. (2008). Value in use through service experience. *Managing Service Quality*, 18(2), 112.
- Shostack, G. L. (1977). Breaking free from product marketing. *Journal of Marketing* (pre-1986), 41(000002), 73.

- Smith, A. E., & Humphreys, M. S. (2006). Evaluation of unsupervised semantic mapping of natural language with Leximancer concept mapping. *Behavior Research Methods*, 38(2), 262.
- Snipes, R. L., Thomson, N. F., & Oswald, S. L. (2006). Gender bias in customer evaluations of service quality: an empirical investigation. *The Journal of Services Marketing*, 20(4), 274-284.