

CULTIVATING POSITIVE WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION THROUGH CUSTOMER-EMPLOYEE BONDS

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we hypothesize and empirically test the proposition that interpersonal bonds, or relationships between employees and customers (Gremler and Brown 1996), can significantly influence positive word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. We believe this may be true for many services, particularly in situations where a relationship has developed between the customer and the service provider. We look at four dimensions of interpersonal bonds: trust, care, rapport, and familiarity. We contend that (1) as a customer's trust increases in a specific employee (or employees), positive WOM communication about the organization is more likely to increase and (2) such trust is a consequence of three other interpersonal relationship dimensions: a personal connection between employees and customers, care displayed by employees, and employee familiarity with customers. These propositions are investigated using data collected from bank customers and dental patients, and we find empirical support for all but one of our hypotheses. A key finding is that the presence of interpersonal relationships between employees and customers is significantly correlated with customer WOM behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers” (Westbrook 1987, p. 261), has recently received renewed attention in the marketing literature (Anderson 1998; Gilly et al. 1998; Money, Gilly, and Graham 1998). Positive WOM communication has been recognized as a particularly valuable vehicle for promoting a firm's products and services. Indeed, given its non-commercial nature, WOM communication is viewed with less skepticism than business initiated promotional efforts (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). Although WOM communication can be very influential in any purchase decision, previous research suggests it is particularly important for services (Ettenson and Turner 1997; Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger 1997; Murray 1991) and that a *single* recommendation—the *only* source of information obtained—is often sufficient to convince a person to try a particular service provider (Gremler 1994; Price and Feick 1984; Reingen 1987).

Even with the renewed interest in WOM communication, antecedents to WOM have received little attention (Anderson 1998). Regrettably, the limited discussions in the marketing literature of how firms can encourage positive WOM behavior have tended to concentrate on reward dispensing strategies or assumed that satisfying customers will naturally lead to these behaviors. As such, the opportunity for employee-customer relational bonds to influence customer WOM behavior has been ignored. A better understanding of the conditions that facilitate positive WOM communication can provide managers with insight as to how to best stimulate such behavior.

In this study, we hypothesize and empirically test the proposition that interpersonal relationships between employees and customers can significantly influence positive WOM communication. For many services, an important component of the offering is the interpersonal interaction between employees and customers (Czepiel and Gilmore 1987; Surprenant and Solomon 1987) or what Gremler and Brown (1996) refer to as “interpersonal bonds.” Scholars have suggested that customers who are members of a service marketer’s “social network” (Reingen and Kernan 1986) or are in situations where “relationship closeness” exists (Colgate and Danaher 1999) are more likely to engage in WOM behavior.

One key dimension of the employee-customer relationship is interpersonal trust, or “confidence in an employee’s reliability and integrity” (adapted from Morgan and Hunt 1994). We contend that as a customer’s trust increases in a specific employee (or employees), positive WOM communication about the organization is more likely to increase. In our proposed model, we argue that such trust is a consequence of three other interpersonal relationship dimensions: familiarity between employees and customers, a personal connection between employees and customers (Gremler and Gwinner 2000), and care displayed by employees (Dubinsky 1994; Lewis 1991; Surprenant and Solomon 1987). That is, a customer’s trust in a specific employee is likely to form if the employee and customer are well known to each other, a personal connection is present in the relationship and the employee has demonstrated genuine concern for the customer’s well-being. Finally, we contend that both personal connection and care are consequences of employee familiarity of customers (Rafaeli 1989; Zeithaml 1981).

Delineating Employee-Customer Relationships

If one accepts a broad definition of a relationship, whereby all interactions between people over an extended period of time constitute relationships (Hinde 1979), then a great number of interactions between customers and employees could be considered “relationships.” We do not believe that *all* interactions constitute relationships. Rather, in the same sense that a relationship between friends, or a husband and wife, involves some deeper meaning beyond frequency of interaction, our notion of an employee-customer relationship goes beyond repeated encounters. That is not to say that repeated encounters with the same service provider do not help to foster relationships between employees and customers. They do. It is just that a history of multiple interactions do not make a relationship.

Formal Versus Personal Relationships

In order to be more precise, it is useful to think about the distinction between *formal* and *personal* relationships (Hinde 1979; McCall 1970). “Formal” relationships are those where the behavior between individuals is primarily based upon the roles individuals occupy in the encounter. Examples of interactions where one’s role will play a large part include interactions between: teacher and student, doctor and patient, waiter and customer. Indeed, researchers have studied how our expectations of such encounters, codified in the form of scripts, influence our behavior and our expectations of the other party (Schank and Abelson 1977). In contrast, the behaviors exhibited in “personal” relationships are guided more on the knowledge each party has of the other as individuals. Although the positions each party occupies in society (that is, their roles) are likely to influence behavior in personal relationships, it is the individual knowledge aspect that primarily influences behavior. We will use the term “interpersonal relationship” to describe the latter types of interactions between customers and employees in this paper.

Familiarity

We define familiarity as the customer's perception that the employee has personal recognition of the customer and knows specific details about his/her service needs. Familiarity is driven by the frequency of the interaction and the depth of the interaction. Naturally, when interacting with someone on a weekly basis (for example, a waitress at a favorite restaurant) the amount of "personal" knowledge gained about that individual will be greater than when interactions occur every three months (for example, the technician at Quick Lube). Frequency of interaction with the same service provider has been identified by many researchers as one aspect that can be used for delineating types of relationships (Gutek et al. 1999; Hinde 1979; Kelley et al. 1983).

We propose that in order for a customer to perceive that he or she is cared for or to sense the existence of a personal connection with a service provider, some knowledge must exist. In a service provision context, this knowledge can be developed through repeated encounters, which results in employees becoming familiar with a customer and their specific service needs. This information can come from explicit verbal information provided by the customer and from an employee's observation of customer behavior during the encounters. In support of our contention, communication researchers have correlated the growth in knowledge about partners with the development of intimate relationships (Crockett and Freidman 1980; Duck 1977). This lends support for a familiarity to caring link. (Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized relationships.)

H1: Familiarity positively influences perceptions of care.

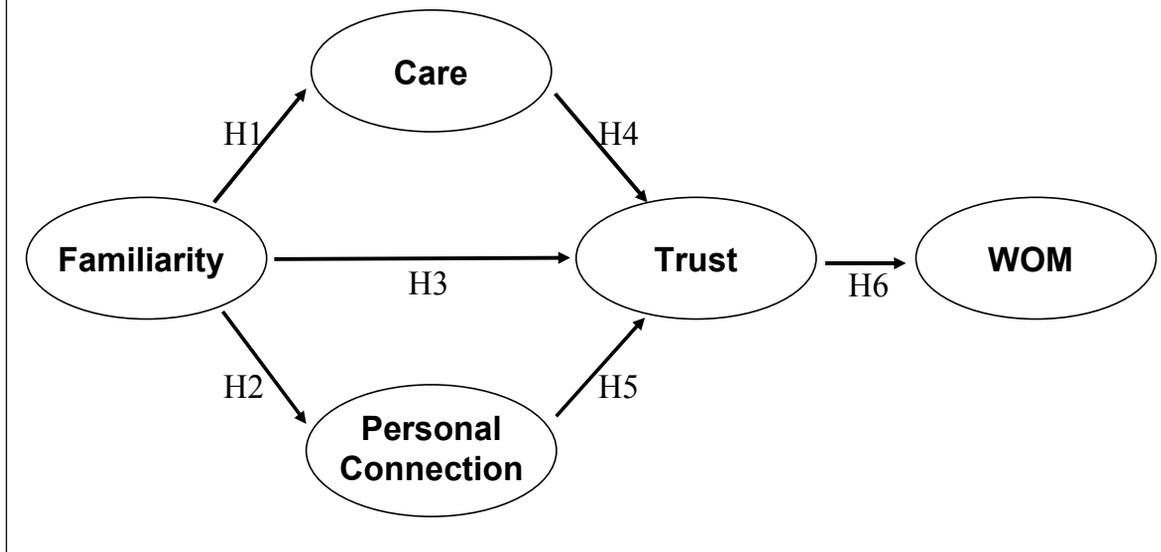
Like its influence on perceptions of care, familiarity can be regarded as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the development of a personal connection with a service provider. In order for personal connection bonds to develop between customers and employees, knowledge of the other participant in the service exchange and sharing of details of one's own experiences (that is, self-disclosure) are necessary. According to Miller and Berg (1984, p. 173) "the closer the relationship to the other and the longer we have known the other, the more likely it is that we will have detailed and extensive knowledge of that other's desires, needs, and preferences." To the extent that this knowledge results in a "connection" between the participants then a bond may be formed. Oakes et al. (1995) found that as members of a 26-day Outward Bound course gained increasing familiarity with other group members their perceptions of group homogeneity were increased. When there are higher levels of homogeneity the chances of two individuals finding some common ground or connection are greater. Thus, familiarity should have a positive influence on the development of a personal connection.

H2: Familiarity positively influences the development of a personal connection.

Familiarity also appears to play a role in the development of trust. In a consumer context, Garbarino and Johnson (1999) empirically demonstrate that, among "strong relationship" customers, there is a positive relationship between a consumer's familiarity with performers in a theatrical context and the consumer's level of trust with the organization. As such, we posit a positive relationship between familiarity and trust in the employee.

H3: Familiarity positively influences perceptions of trust in the employee.

Figure 1
Relational Constructs Influencing Word-of-Mouth Communication



Care

We define care as the customer's perception of the employee having genuine concern for the customer's well being. The level of care exhibited in a customer-employee context may be partially explained by the tenets of equity theory. Gouldner (1960) states that in interpersonal interactions individuals tend to help those that have helped them. A general norm of reciprocity may exist in service relationships where an employee exhibits concern for a customer because they feel indebted to them for their business. Of course, there may be insincere displays of caring in business transactions, but our discussion focuses on those that are derived in relational exchanges and are genuine.

The degree to which caring leads to trust is likely to be based upon the motivation ascribed to the employee for the caring behaviors. Miller and Berg (1984) identify three classes of giving behavior that are useful for examining the motivations directing caring behavior in a service exchange. Obligatory behaviors are those that are normative in nature and, thus, expected in certain contexts. For example, we expect service employees to be polite. Instrumental behaviors are motivated by goal achievement. In the current discussion, caring behavior exhibited only to get a customer to purchase more would represent instrumental behavior. Finally, hedonic behaviors are those motivated by the giver's desire to make others feel good. Caring behaviors that are ascribed hedonic motivations are likely to result in greater levels of trust being formed.

H4: Caring behaviors positively influence perceptions of trust in the employee.

We define a personal connection as a strong sense of affiliation or bond based on some tie. We often hear in everyday language phrases like “I really connected with him” or “we really clicked.” Despite the adage that “opposites attract,” connections are often based upon having some common attribute (such as personality or attitudes) or interests with another party (Duck 1994). Research in the attraction literature has argued that information communicated during initial encounters is used by the individuals (for example, potential friends) to assess the level of similarity between their personalities. Individuals perceiving a high level of similarity are more likely to form relationships (Duck 1976).

In a similar vein, Price, Arnould and Tierney (1995) discuss a relational factor they call “authentic understanding” which describes relational elements well beyond traditional customer-contact employee roles. Authentic understanding is developed when “service provider and client engage in self-revelation, expend emotional energy, and connect as individuals” (Price, Arnould and Tierney 1995, p. 92). Although their construct is developed in the context of extended, affectively charged, intimate service encounters, it is possible for connections among customers and employees to occur in briefer transactions that are repetitive in nature (for example, weekly interactions with a dry cleaner) (Czepiel 1990). Indeed, it is not unheard of for customers and employees to develop strong friendships out of such mundane encounters (Goodwin 1996; Goodwin and Gremler 1996).

H5: A personal connection positively influences perceptions of trust in the employee.

Trust

Trust can be conceptualized as existing between individuals (interpersonal trust), between organizations (organizational trust), or between individuals and organizations (inter- or intra-organizational trust) (Ganesan and Hess 1997; Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993). The current study focuses on trust developed in a relationship between individuals, specifically customers and contact employees. We operationalize trust in a manner consistent with the work of Morgan and Hunt (1994) who define trust as “existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (p. 23). Thus, our construct can be considered trust in the employee, as opposed to trust in an organization.

Empirical research examining the employee-customer interaction has found that encounters that can be characterized as occurring under the broader umbrella of a relationship are likely to produce customer advocacy behaviors such as positive WOM communication (Griffin 1995; Beatty et al. 1996; Bendapudi and Berry 1997). Further, the trust construct, specifically, has been shown or theorized to be antecedent to many pro-firm related behaviors (Ganesan 1994; Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993; Morgan and Hunt 1994). In fact, Ganesan and Hess (1999) found that interpersonal credibility (the individual partner’s ability and intention to keep promises) was a stronger predictor of the buyer’s commitment to a vendor organization than organizational credibility (the organization’s ability and intention to keep promises). Garbarino and Johnson (1999) find trust in an organization to be related, among relationship customers, to customers’ future intentions. While their future intention battery did not include WOM communication, saying positive things about the organization to others is not inconsistent with the behaviors they did measure—attendance, subscription, and donations. We propose that the trust construct will have a

direct positive influence on consumers' propensity to engage in positive WOM communication behaviors.

H6: *Trust has a positive influence on word-of-mouth communication.*

METHODOLOGY

To empirically investigate the proposed model, we use a self-report questionnaire format with two sets of respondents, bank customers and dental patients. The bank sample consists of 1303 respondents randomly selected from among the customers of one district of a large bank in the southwestern U.S. In this sample, 48 percent of the respondents are men, the average age is 48.4, and the average length of time as a customer of the bank is 13.2 years. Additionally, 368 patients of a dental practice in a large, southwestern U.S. metropolitan area also participated in the study. Of these respondents, 42 percent are men, the average age is 47.6, and the average length of time as a patient is 8.7 years.

Multi-item scales are used to measure each of the five constructs included in the model discussed earlier. In particular, measures for familiarity (3 items), care (3 items), personal connection (5 items), and WOM communication (4 items) were created for use in this study. The trust measure (5 items) was based upon Morgan and Hunt's (1994) measure of trust. Items were rated on 7-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

A two-step approach was employed to analyze the data. In the first phase, the measurement model was assessed by performing a confirmatory factor analysis using the CALIS procedure in SAS. The results suggest a good fit of the model to the data in both the bank sample (TLI = .964; CFI = .971; $P^2 = 1213.1$, $df = 239$)¹ and in the dental sample (TLI = .929; CFI = .939; $P^2 = 852.8$, $df = 239$). All indicator loadings are positive and significant ($p < 0.01$). The factor loadings for each item of each construct are fairly high, with .80 being the lowest loading of any of the items in the bank sample and .79 being the lowest factor loading in the dental sample. The statistics also provide evidence of reliability, as the coefficient alphas for each scale ranged from .92 to .96 in the bank sample and from .86 to .96 in the dental sample.

In the second phase of the analysis, the relationships between the constructs in the structural model (displayed in Figure 1) were assessed. The goodness-of-fit indices suggest a suitable fit of the model to the data in both the bank sample (TLI = .961; CFI = .962; $P^2 = 1114.3$, $df = 146$) and in the dental sample (TLI = .939; CFI = .948; $P^2 = 514.5$, $df = 146$). In each data set, all but one of the standardized path coefficients in the model are positive and significant. The only nonsignificant path, both in the bank sample and the dental sample, is the familiarity-trust path. Thus, there is empirical support for *all* of the hypotheses specified in the model except for H3.

Of particular interest is an examination of the amount of variance explained in each of the four endogenous variables in the model. The variance explained (measured in terms of R^2) in each of these constructs is: for *trust* the amount of variance explained is .492 in the bank sample and .491 in the dental sample²; for *care* the variance explained is .512 / .599; for *personal connection* the variance explained is .775 / .612; and for *WOM communication* the variance explained is .172 / .268. Even

¹ TLI refers to the Tucker-Lewis \bar{D} (Tucker and Lewis 1973). CFI refers to the Comparative Fit Index of Bentler (1990). The P^2 statistics are significant at the .01 level.

² For the remaining statistics, those statistics from the bank sample will be presented first, followed by a slash "/" and then the statistics from the dental sample.

though the amount of variance explained for WOM communication is, relatively speaking, not as large as it is for the other endogenous constructs, these last two statistics provide evidence of the importance of customer-employee relationships in encouraging WOM communication. These statistics are noteworthy considering that satisfaction with the service, a construct that has typically been thought to drive positive WOM communication, is not included in our model.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In spite of the importance WOM communication can have in encouraging new customers to try a service provider, businesses have generally struggled in developing strategies to encourage WOM behavior. Many providers have assumed that providing service that satisfies their customers is a sufficient WOM-stimulating strategy. However, researchers have suggested that satisfaction with the core service provided may not necessarily generate positive WOM (Gremler and Brown 1999; Reynolds and Beatty 1999). In this paper we have argued, and presented empirical support, that the fostering of interpersonal relationships between employees and customers may help encourage positive customer WOM behavior. Thus, *encouraging interpersonal bonds* may be a strategy worth considering to increase the likelihood of customer WOM behavior.

In the remainder of the paper we provide an outline for some strategies a service firm might consider in order to strengthen interpersonal bonds between employees and customers, including four key areas: service design, support systems, employees, and customers.

Focusing on Service Design

One way to facilitate the development of interpersonal bonds is to design the *environment* where the service takes place (the servicescape) in such a way that opportunities for interactions (both formal and informal) between employees and customers are plentiful. For example, some firms encourage or require their associates to dress in a manner that mirrors the typical attire of customers (and thus minimizes the role status barriers) and thus invites the development of interpersonal bonds.

In addition to the environment, services marketers might consider how to design the service delivery *process* to encourage employee-customer interactions. This could include “assigning” an employee to a specific customer to create “an ongoing series of interactions” (Reynolds and Beatty 1999). Many banks have operationalized this idea by assigning a “personal banker” to their more affluent customers.

Focusing on Support Systems

Service firms might consider adopting (or altering) *technology* in order to allow more time for employees to interact with customers. Such technology might free employees up at some points during the delivery process and allow them to spend more time interacting with customers.

Data bases might be designed and used to build a base of knowledge to encourage the development of employee familiarity of customers. For example, the inclusion of data base records to record qualities customers have in common with employees can be used to cultivate the development of customer-employee rapport (Gremler and Gwinner 2000).

Focusing on Employees

Service businesses might consider *empowering employees* and giving them the freedom to develop relationships, do what is right, and correct problems. Such efforts can often result in a customer's trust in an employee developing. The flattening of organizations and the employees' ready access to database information is better enabling this empowerment.

If the organization would like to encourage relationships to develop between customers and employees as part of a WOM strategy, then employees need to be *trained* to develop interpersonal bonds and *rewarded* accordingly when success occurs.

Focusing on Customers

Similarly, if the organization would like to encourage relationships to develop between customers and employees as part of a WOM strategy, then customers also need to be *rewarded* for developing interpersonal bonds with employees. Firms might even point out to the customer the benefits of knowing a specific person within the organization.

As a caveat, care must be exhibited in putting too much emphasis on developing relationships with customers—not all customers want to develop interpersonal relationships with their service providers (Adelman, Ahuvia, and Goodwin 1994; Goodwin 1996).

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QUIS 7

Service Quality in the New Economy: Interdisciplinary and International Dimensions

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