

## Rapport-Building Behaviors Used by Retail Employees

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### Abstract

The rapport between employees and customers represents a particularly salient issue in retail businesses characterized by significant interpersonal interactions. Although rapport relates significantly to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication, the behaviors employees use to develop rapport receive minimal attention in marketing and management literature. Using research on rapport-building behaviors identified in other literature as a basis for investigation, this study investigates the extent to which such behaviors are relevant in commercial settings. With the critical incident technique, the authors identify rapport-building behaviors commonly used by retail employees in 388 service encounters. Analysis of 824 rapport-building behaviors described in these encounters confirms three categories suggested by previous research – uncommonly attentive, common grounding, and courteous behavior – and identifies two additional categories that have not been linked to rapport in retail settings, namely, connecting and information sharing behavior. The authors conclude with a discussion of managerial and research implications.

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The interactions between retail employees and customers can have a tremendous impact on customer perceptions of the organization. One construct that has gained some attention in the study of commercial relationships, rapport, refers to the character of the interaction between employees and customers (Gremler and Gwinner 2000). From a theoretical perspective, rapport is thought to increase (1) feelings of perceived control in a relationship, leading to greater levels of customer satisfaction with a firm, and (2) the level of commitment toward a relationship, leading to higher levels of loyalty to the firm (cf. Campbell, Davis and Skinner 2006; DeWitt and Brady 2003; Gremler and Gwinner 2000; LaBahn 1996). The development of rapport between front-line retail employees and customers thus has the potential to make a significant positive impact on the firm. However, current research lacks an appreciation of what employees can do to build rapport with customers during the interaction; that is, an understanding of the mechanisms by which rapport is developed and maintained in a commercial context (Campbell et al. 2006). This article reports a study aimed at

providing retail managers and employees with the information they need to encourage and develop rapport with customers.

Its potential to affect key outcome variables important to businesses makes a better understanding of customer–employee rapport crucial for both retail managers and scholars. Retail managers should be concerned with the issue of rapport because of its potential impact on managerially relevant issues in retail organizations. For example, rapport emerges as the single major determinant in the long-term success of business relationships (Ewing, Pinto, and Soutar 2001; Henke 1995). Retailing scholars should also be concerned with rapport, because a more thorough understanding of it could contribute to understanding of how customer–employee relationships affect the retail experience. For example, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) find that rapport relates significantly to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth communication. However, they do not examine the specific behaviors employees use to develop rapport. In this study, we review rapport-building behaviors suggested in other literature and examine the extent to which they are used in retail interactions.

Rapport appears to be applicable across a wide range of retail interactions, including those in which repeated interactions with the same employee are unlikely (e.g., airline travel). Although scholars have long distinguished between recurring and

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nonrecurring retail interactions (Bitner and Hubbert 1994; Rust and Oliver 1994), most research focusing on customer–employee interactions refers to repeated interactions (cf. Goodwin and Gremler 1996; Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998; Reynolds and Beatty 1999). Because rapport applies to many retail situations, and therefore is useful in both recurring and nonrecurring retail encounters, it provides a versatile and important construct for retailers (cf. DeWitt and Brady 2003; Gremler and Gwinner 2000).

This research attempts to identify the specific rapport-building behaviors often present in retail interactions. Specifically, we conduct a study to investigate the following question: *Are the same rapport-building behaviors that mark interpersonal interactions also used by retail employees in service encounters?* Toward this end, we first review relevant rapport research published primarily in the social psychology literature. Next, we discuss the results of a study designed to identify rapport behaviors used in retail service encounters. Finally, we discuss the managerial and research implications derived from our findings.

### Rapport conceptualization and behaviors

The construct of rapport has been the subject of studies in a variety of contexts and conceptualized in many different, though related, ways. For example, in a supervisor–subordinate context, rapport refers to “communication characterized by warmth, enthusiasm, and interest” (Heintzman et al. 1993, p. 200). In the area of conflict mediation, rapport building entails the efforts used to create “more harmonious interaction between the parties” (Ross and Wieland 1996, p. 229). In the context of the relationship between a caregiver and a person with developmental disabilities, rapport is discussed in terms of the “quality of the relationship between two people” (McLaughlin and Carr 2005, p. 69). Finally, in the linguistics field, Spencer-Oatey (2002) conceptualizes rapport as social interactions with a particularly noticeable impact on a relationship with another person. We cite these four studies not to suggest that one conceptualization of rapport is correct and another is incorrect but rather to illustrate the varied and context-specific nature of the construct.

Altman (1990) acknowledges the socially contextual nature of rapport and suggests that what constitutes and influences the development of rapport depends at least partially on the people involved and the context in which they interact. Altman also contends that in addition to these social influences, the physical environment (e.g., public vs. private settings) that embeds the relationship influences the rapport process. Therefore, given the impact of the social context and the environmental setting on the nature of rapport, we examine rapport in *commercial* (retail) contexts. Examining how rapport-building behaviors employed in other contexts, such as personal relationships or doctor–patient interactions, may function in retail contexts provides the main contribution of this research.

To study rapport in a retail context, we define customer–employee rapport as the perceived quality of the relationship, dealing with the communication between the two parties and characterized by a connection or understanding among the par-

ticipants. The rapport-building behaviors discussed in the next section and those identified in the empirical study are not dimensions of rapport but instead represent employee behaviors enacted to increase a customer’s rapport perceptions. On the basis of an extensive review of rapport across various contexts – ranging from education to roommates to therapists to personal selling – and a series of in-depth interviews with both consumers and service providers, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) examine two dimensions of rapport in commercial service encounters: (1) enjoyable interactions involving (2) personal connections between the participants. This “commercial rapport” conceptualization is consistent with the view of rapport in other contexts. For example, in their often-cited article on the nature of rapport, Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) describe three components that characterize relationships with a high level of rapport. Their “mutual attentiveness” and “positivity” components suggest rapport is higher in interactions in which the participants are interested in each other and share a feeling of caring or friendliness. These two elements also appear in Gremler and Gwinner’s operationalization of the enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport. Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal’s third element, coordination (participants are “in sync”), is reflected in Gremler and Gwinner’s personal connection dimension of rapport.

Gremler and Gwinner’s (2000) study suggests that rapport has a positive relationship with customer perceptions of satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth communication in a retail bank context. Likewise, we view a customer’s rapport perceptions as antecedents of service quality. Recent service quality conceptualizations have brought increased attention to interaction quality as an element of a higher-order service quality construct (Brady and Cronin 2001). We suggest that enjoyable interactions that establish a personal connection positively influence Brady and Cronin’s interaction quality factor and, subsequently, service quality. Just as Altman (1990) argues that researchers should account for the contextual impact (e.g., commercial setting) when evaluating rapport, others suggest the need to consider context when evaluating service quality (Brady and Cronin 2001). Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz (1996) offer a context-specific hierarchical model of retail store service quality which – similar to Brady and Cronin’s work – highlights personal interaction as a factor of service quality. Their personal interaction dimension combines employee behaviors that inspire confidence and are courteous. Although the personal connection dimension of rapport is similar to the service quality constructs proposed by Brady and Cronin (2001) and Dabholkar et al. (1996), the notion of a personal connection between participants makes the rapport construct unique and different from the proposed subdimensions of service quality.

A variety of strategies or techniques for building rapport appear in social psychology and communication literature (Andersen and Guerrero 1998; Bernieri et al. 1996; Ford and Etienne 1994; Lakin and Chartrand 2003; Thompson 1998; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1987; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990), yet few studies examine whether the same rapport-building behaviors are used and/or applicable in commercial settings (cf. Bendapudi and Leone 2002; DeWitt and Brady 2003; Gremler and Gwinner 2000). We therefore review

the existing literature that has sought to identify behaviors viable for rapport building.

### *Rapport-building behaviors*

Our review of the literature across several disciplines suggests that rapport-building behaviors can be classified broadly into four groups: attentive behavior, imitative behavior, courteous behavior, and common grounding behavior.

#### *Attentive behavior*

Some researchers contend that simply being attentive to others can build rapport. Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1987) argue that rapport is highest when an encounter contains a high level of mutual attentiveness between individuals. In this regard, Bernieri et al. (1996) identify three predictors of attentiveness: eye contact, physical proximity, and back-channel responses (e.g., head nods and “um-hmms”). Consistent with this notion, Grahe and Bernieri (1999) show that observers of dyadic interactions are more accurate in their rapport judgments when they can view the nonverbal aspects of the interaction. Attentive behavior also can be exhibited through motor mimicry – that is, when one party displays communicative behavior that is appropriate to the situation or for the person with whom they are interacting (Andersen and Guerrero 1998). Finally, Hollman and Kleiner (1997) contend that rapport can be developed through emphatic listening and attentiveness to how the other party is communicating. Such attentive behavior appears particularly relevant in retail encounters.

#### *Imitative behavior*

Rapport often is cultivated by imitating the behavior of the other party in an interaction. In general, this imitation involves matching the behaviors and/or voice patterns of the other person (Hunt and Price 2002; Thompson 1998; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1987; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990). Such matching activities can take place on a variety of dimensions, including posture, voice tone, type of language, pace of speech, gestures, breathing patterns, or facial expressions. Furthermore, social psychology literature suggests that emotions displayed by two individuals often are matched through imitation, mimicry, and interpersonal facial feedback (cf. Andersen and Guerrero 1998; Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994) and that mimicry can increase rapport (Lakin and Chartrand 2003). In a sales context, a neuro-linguistic programming approach calls for salespeople to observe verbal and nonverbal customer cues and react accordingly to develop higher levels of rapport (Nickels, Everett, and Klein 1983; Wood 2006). Such imitative behaviors might be useful in interactions with retail customers because people tend to gravitate toward and become more comfortable around those similar to themselves (Thompson 1998).

#### *Courteous behavior*

Other scholars suggest courteous behavior is an effective method for cultivating rapport (Ford and Etienne 1994; Hawes 1994; LaBahn 1996; Sutton and Rafaeli 1988). For example, in a study of grocery cashiers, Ford (1995, p. 66) observes that

courteousness helps a retailer “form a quick ‘bond’ with the customer and creates the necessary rapport for a positive service encounter.” In an organizational context, LaBahn (1996) finds a significant relationship between an advertising agency’s concern for the welfare of clients and clients’ rapport perceptions. Courteous behaviors often include simple actions that make encounters enjoyable for the other person. For retail employees, these actions might entail smiling, using congenial greetings, engaging in polite behavior, showing concern for the customer’s welfare, remembering the customer’s name, or thanking the customer for his or her patronage (cf. Hunt and Price 2002).

#### *Common grounding behavior*

In personal selling literature, scholars suggest that people experience “meaningful interactions” when they have similar backgrounds, characteristics, tastes, and lifestyles (Churchill, Collins, and Strang 1975; Ewing et al. 2001). Common grounding occurs when one person attempts to discover areas of similarity or mutual interest with the other (Goleman 1998). Office scanning, in which salespeople look around a prospect’s office for common ground discussion topics (e.g., evidence of mutual hobbies or similar interests), is one strategy salespeople often use to attempt to build common ground with customers (Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 2007). Employee behavior that attempts to identify areas of similarity also seems applicable in a wide range of retail contexts, especially if employees and customers have an opportunity to engage in varying degrees of conversation unrelated to the transaction (e.g., small talk).

In summary, four broad categories of rapport-building behaviors emerge from previous research. Although these behaviors have not been studied in retail encounters, they hold promise in such settings.

## **Method**

### *The critical incident technique*

The critical incident technique (CIT), the method employed in this study, relies on a set of procedures to collect, content analyze, and classify observations of human behavior (Grove and Fisk 1997). The CIT methodology offers a significant benefit, because it collects data from the respondent’s perspective and in his or her own words (Gremler 2004). It therefore provides a rich source of data by allowing respondents to determine which incidents are the most relevant to them for the phenomenon being investigated. In so doing, CIT allows respondents to include as wide a range of responses as possible within an overall research framework (Gabbott and Hogg 1996). Furthermore, CIT appears useful in studying rapport-building behaviors in commercial contexts, because it provides a means to gain knowledge about little known phenomena or when an in-depth understanding is desired (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; Gremler 2004).

### *Data collection instrument*

We employ two CIT instruments: One form completed by retail customers and a second form completed by retail employ-

ees. Participants responding in the role of the customer received the following instructions:

Think of a time when you had an experience with a service company or retailer where the employee attempted to establish rapport with you. In particular, we are interested in situations where an employee specifically sought to create a warm, enjoyable interaction in an attempt to ‘connect’ with you (the customer).

Respondents provided information about the company, type of service, location of the company, and when the incident took place. They then responded to a series of questions to assist their recall of the incident. Questions specifically prompted them to describe the incident, recount what the employee specifically said or did in an attempt to establish rapport, disclose their responses to the actions of the employee, explain why this incident stood out, and report whether they continued to patronize the organization after the incident.

Employee respondents received similar instructions that asked them to think of a time they attempted to establish rapport with a customer and then describe that interaction in detail.

#### *Data collection procedures*

We collected the data in two waves. In Sample 1, 77 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory marketing course at a public university in the western United States participated as data collectors as part of a class assignment. This technique has been used successfully in a variety of studies (e.g., Bitner et al. 1990; Gwinner et al. 1998; Keaveney 1995), especially CIT research (Gremler 2004). Prior to data collection, students received training in the CIT method, including an overview and examples of appropriate and inappropriate (e.g., incomplete) responses. In addition, the training instructed students to terminate the interview and seek another respondent when a respondent was unable to think of a rapport-building incident.

Gremler (2004) recommends that content analytic CIT studies should not use the same data set to develop and verify classification schemes. Therefore, we collected a second set of data to serve as the verification (confirmation) sample. Specifically, 64 undergraduate students enrolled in services marketing course at a public university in the Midwestern United States served as data collectors for Sample 2. The procedures are identical to those used for Sample 1.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to encourage authentic responses, we undertook two main actions. First, the instructions to the student data collectors included a warning that the fabrication of an incident to complete the assignment would be considered cheating and those violating this requirement would have to deal with university authorities. Second, the instructions indicated respondents would be randomly selected and contacted for a verification check (the survey included a request for a first name and a daytime telephone number). A visual inspection of the questionnaires indicated sufficient variability in both handwriting and patterns across responses, as well as consistency within individual responses. Also, we randomly selected 35 respondents from Sample 1 and telephoned them to determine if they had participated in the research; 30 indicated that they had, and the remaining 5 could not be reached during three attempts. In those situations,

#### *Classification sample*

The student interviewers collected 300 critical incidents for Sample 1, of which 273 (91%) are suitable for use. The remaining 27 incidents (15 completed by customers, 12 by employees) are not appropriate as input for understanding employee attempts at rapport building, according to the criteria listed in the coding instructions in Appendix A.

The critical incidents determined usable include stories told by 133 customers (49% of the sample) and 140 employees. The sample is even in terms of gender, consisting of 137 men and 136 women. The customer respondents range in age from 18 to 71 years, with an average age of 29.3 years (standard deviation = 11.6); the age range of employee respondents is 18–53 years, with an average age of 26.1 years (standard deviation = 8.0).

#### *Verification sample*

In Sample 2, the students collected 127 critical incidents, of which 115 (91%) are suitable for use, according to the criteria in Appendix A. The usable incidents come from 59 customers (51% of the sample) and 56 employees. In this sample, 72 respondents (63%) are women. The customer respondents in the sample range in age from 20 to 65 years, with an average age of 38.2 years (standard deviation = 12.2); the age range of employee respondents is 20–73 years, with an average of 42.5 years (standard deviation = 12.8).

#### *Data analysis*

##### *Category development*

As our review of rapport literature suggests, retail employees might use four broad categories of behaviors to build rapport in a commercial setting: attentive, common grounding, imitative, and courteous behavior. These four categories served as the *a priori* starting point for developing our CIT classification scheme.

To construct a classification scheme of rapport-building behaviors, two researchers – the lead author and another expert in the field (i.e., Judges A and B, respectively) – collected, read, reread, sorted, and resorted the critical incidents from Sample 1. This effort revealed that many incidents include more than one discrete rapport-building behavior. Consistent with prior research (Bendapudi and Leone 2002; Keaveney 1995), Judges A and B determined that the discrete behaviors noted within each critical incident, rather than the entire critical incident story, provide the most appropriate unit of analysis and best preserve the specificity of the data. The judges then discussed the general themes that emerged, and Judge A developed a classification scheme with five broad categories of rapport-building behaviors, fairly consistent with the *a priori* categories. Judges A and B further analyzed and discussed the behaviors in each category, which resulted in the development of more specific subcategories of rapport-building behaviors (fourteen in all). It also led to the creation of instructions that other judges could

we contacted a different respondent from that data collector’s set to verify study participation. Overall, we conclude that the data collected are authentic.

Table 1  
Classification results of rapport-building behaviors

Rapport-building behavior category	Customer-described behaviors		Employee-described behaviors		Row total	%
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
Category 1: Uncommonly attentive behavior						
1A: atypical actions	89	21.2	73	18.1	162	19.7
1B: personal recognition	17	4.0	12	3.0	29	3.5
1C: intense personal interest	25	6.0	21	5.2	46	5.6
Category 1 total	131	31.2	106	26.3	237	28.8
Category 2: Common grounding behavior						
2A: identifying mutual interests	7	1.6	17	4.2	24	2.9
2B: finding other similarities	25	6.0	16	4.0	41	5.0
Category 2 total	32	7.6	33	8.2	65	7.9
Category 3: Courteous behavior						
3A: unexpected honesty	25	6.0	9	2.2	34	4.1
3B: civility	22	5.2	10	2.5	32	3.9
3C: empathy	19	4.5	22	5.4	41	5.0
Category 3 total	66	15.7	41	10.1	107	13.0
Category 4: Connecting behavior						
4A: using humor	13	3.1	20	5.0	33	4.0
4B: pleasant conversation	57	13.6	85	21.0	142	17.2
4C: friendly interaction	24	5.7	24	5.9	48	5.8
Category 4 total	94	22.4	129	31.9	223	27.0
Category 5: Information sharing behavior						
5A: giving advice	19	4.5	15	3.7	34	4.1
5B: imparting knowledge	45	10.7	47	11.6	92	11.2
5C: asking questions	33	7.9	33	8.2	66	8.0
Category 5 total	97	23.1	95	23.5	192	23.3
Column total	420	100	404	100	824	100

Notes: Because the classification sample (Sample 1) and verification sample (Sample 2) do not substantially differ, we combine the data into a single sample for ease of presentation and discussion. The percentages for customer- and employee-described behaviors represent the proportions of each respective subset of the data. The Row Total percentages in the far right column represent the proportions of the entire data set.

use to recognize the operational definitions of each category and subcategory of behaviors and thus classify rapport-building behaviors in each incident. (See Appendix A for the coding instructions and the operational definitions of each category.)

In the next phase of analysis, a third judge, a doctoral marketing student (Judge C), read through all of the incidents, identified the rapport-building behavior(s) in each, and coded each behavior using the classification scheme. A fourth judge, a graduate student with limited knowledge of the study (Judge D), independently read through all of the incidents and also coded the behaviors in each incident. For those behaviors about which Judges C and D did not agree, the first author (Judge A) resolved any disagreements to determine a final categorization of each behavior. In total, the data from Sample 1 yield 273 usable critical incidents containing 571 rapport-building behaviors.

#### Category confirmation

Sample 2 serves as the verification sample to test the newly developed classification scheme. We identified the rapport-building behaviors in Sample 2 incidents following the same

procedure as used in Sample 1. The second sample yields 253 rapport-building behaviors within 115 critical incidents. Judges C and D again independently classified the behaviors contained in the Sample 2 critical incidents. No new categories emerged in the process, which suggests that we collected a sufficient number of incidents for the CIT analysis (Flanagan 1954; Keaveney 1995).

#### Combining samples

Because no new rapport-building behaviors emerge from Sample 2, we assess whether we can combine the data from the two samples. Specifically, a  $\chi^2$  test indicates that the distribution of rapport-building behaviors does not differ significantly across the two samples ( $\chi^2 = .0053, p > .10$ ). In addition, we compute  $\chi^2$  values for each individual rapport-building behavior and find that only two of the fourteen values computed are statistically significant at the .05 level. On the basis of the results of the overall  $\chi^2$  test and the  $\chi^2$  tests for the individual rapport-building behaviors, we deem it appropriate to combine the data from the two samples for the purposes of presenting the results and con-

ducting further analyses. Therefore, we base our study on 388 critical incidents containing 824 rapport-building behaviors.

### Reliability

To assess the reliability of the classification scheme, we use two statistics: percentage of agreement and Perreault and Leigh's (1989)  $I_r$  statistic. Across the 824 rapport-building behaviors, Judges C and D independently agree about the classification of 680 behaviors for an overall agreement percentage of .825. Perreault and Leigh's  $I_r$  value, which takes into account the number of categories included in the classification scheme, is .939 across the two judges, well above the average of .85 typically reported in critical incident research (cf. Gremler 2004). These statistics suggest a high level of reliability for our identification of rapport-building behaviors according to our classification scheme.

## Results

An analysis of the incidents suggests the rapport-building behaviors used by retail employees in interactions with customers are relatively consistent with the a priori behaviors identified in previous literature. Overall, we find that retail employees use five broad categories of rapport-building behaviors in commercial contexts: uncommonly attentive behavior, common grounding behavior, courteous behavior, connecting behavior, and information sharing behavior. Three of these five categories are consistent with existing rapport literature, whereas two represent categories of behaviors not frequently mentioned in cultivating rapport. We provide a summary of the results in Table 1, which includes the five major categories of rapport-building behaviors as well as fourteen subcategories, the overall frequency of each behavior, and the frequency of each behavior as reported by both customer and employee respondents. In addition, Table 2 contains representative paraphrases of the incidents, describing behaviors from each subcategory.

### Category 1: Uncommonly attentive behavior

Rapport-building behaviors in this first category involve instances in which the employee displays what could be considered particularly attentive behavior. Such behaviors often appear in situations in which the employee, as perceived by the customer, performs out-of-the-ordinary or above-and-beyond actions. Such attentiveness appears instrumental in the development of rapport between the employee and the customer and is consistent with one of the a priori set of behaviors, attentive behavior. A total of 237 behaviors, or almost 29% overall, fall within this category.<sup>3</sup> We label the three subcategories of uncommonly attentive behavior atypical actions, personal recognition, and intense personal interest.

### Subcategory 1A: Atypical actions

Atypical action behaviors, the most frequently occurring behavior in our data, include situations in which the customer perceives that the employee has gone out of his or her way or "above and beyond the call of duty" to respond to the customer's situation or please the customer. Respondents believe these actions help the employee establish rapport with the customer. For example, in recounting a visit to a clothing retailer, one customer reported, "I told [*the employee*] what type of clothing items I was looking for, and she gave me some suggestions and took me around the store. She helped me find sizes and went out of her way to call other stores to find some items they no longer had in stock." This grateful customer feels the extra effort contributed significantly to establishing rapport. (Examples of behaviors in each subcategory appear in Table 2.)

Bettencourt and Brown (1997, p. 41) refer to such atypical employee actions as "extra-role customer service," which they describe as "discretionary behaviors of contact employees in serving customers that extend beyond formal role requirements." They contend that such behaviors, including those in which employees "go out of their way" or "beyond the call of duty" for customers, often lead to customer delight. Other scholars have used such terms as "providing little extras" and "extra attention" for similar types of atypical employee behaviors (Bitner et al. 1990; Price, Arnould, and Deibler 1995). Thus, the demonstration of atypical actions to foster rapport seems consistent with extant literature.

### Subcategory 1B: Personal recognition

Behaviors in which employees recognize customers by name or recall specific information about a particular customer constitute this subcategory. Through such recognition, the customer feels as though the employee "connects" with him or her. One customer recalled such an incident with her hair salon: "My hair stylist always makes small talk, but one particular visit was especially nice. She remembered that I was coming during my lunch hour and tried to work quickly, but she also asked about my children. She seemed to remember things from other appointments. . . I was very impressed that she cared enough to remember. . . this was the first time I really talked with her, more than small talk. I felt a kind of personal connection with her."

Beatty et al. (1996) indicate that relationships between retail employees and customers, particularly in the early stages of the relationship, grow stronger when employees remember more about their customers (including names) and their lives. Employee recognition of a customer's uniqueness, termed "personalization" by some scholars (e.g., Surprenant and Solomon 1987; Winsted 1997), generally has a positive impact on service encounter evaluations (Brown and Swartz 1989; Winsted 1997). Using a customer's name also shows that the employee is interested and can be an important rapport management behavior (Campbell et al. 2006).

### Subcategory 1C: Intense personal interest

In some incidents, employees demonstrate a level of interest in the customer as a person, perceived by the customer as unexpected and out of the ordinary. This intense interest suggests

<sup>3</sup> Although the distribution of behaviors varies somewhat, the types of behaviors described by both employees and customers are remarkably similar (see Table 1), and we present them together to facilitate discussion of the findings.

Table 2  
Paraphrases of representative rapport-building behavior descriptions

Customer-described incidents	Employee-described incidents
<p>Category 1: Uncommonly attentive behavior</p> <p>1A. Atypical actions <i>We went to a new restaurant. We didn't know what food was on the menu. So my mother jokingly asked if we could have samples of everything on the menu. The next thing we know the waiter brings out samples of everything from the menu for all of us. . .he even brought out more than we asked for. He did more than just his job. . .we were completely shocked. We thanked him many times. (#105)</i></p> <p>1B. Personal recognition <i>Every month I would go in and have my prescriptions refilled. By the third time I went in the pharmacist knew my name and face. He would ask about my family, boy friend, etc. . .I enjoyed it. It made me feel special because I knew he dealt with hundreds of people a day and he made sure he knew each person. (#166)</i></p> <p>1C. Intense personal interest <i>The [restaurant] server was very attentive. He came right to our table and asked us how we were doing. Then he sat down with us and talked to us about everything in general. The server was really nice. . . [and] made it a comfortable atmosphere to eat in. (#460)</i></p>	<p><i>A woman came into our shop, obviously looking for a variety of lingerie. She wanted panties and bras and a robe. I approached her and asked what she was looking for. She wasn't sure, so I spent one full hour showing her everything and telling her the features and benefits of everything, but mostly talking with her about her upcoming wedding and her honeymoon, which she was shopping for. . .when she left, she seemed very happy and told us that she would be back soon. (#052)</i></p> <p><i>I greeted a customer I recognized from an outside meeting by name. This established a quick rapport and made the customer feel at ease. Saying the customer's name and the names of her children started the conversation and it just flowed from there. I asked if I could put the customer in a book for preferred customers that allows the store to call them when they have a specific product in stock or on sale. (#220)</i></p> <p><i>A customer came into my office to inquire about a mortgage. She brought her little boy into the office with her. Along with keeping a conversation with her, I kept a conversation with the little boy and made him feel important and comfortable being there with us. Before doing business I tried to. . .make her feel like I cared about more than just her money. . .I told the mother she had a polite little boy and showed interest in their lives. (#300)</i></p>
<p>Category 2: Common grounding behavior</p> <p>2A. Identifying mutual interests <i>When I got to the drive-through window, after ordering, the employee who was getting my order heard music coming from my car and asked me what kind of [stereo] system I had. . .I told him and then he instantly started telling me about his system. . .after a good amount of time talking about his system the employee gave me my food and I was on my way. (#010)</i></p> <p>2B. Finding other similarities <i>We all wanted to see what they had on special since we didn't have a whole lot of money. Our server asked us if we were college students and we all answered yes. The server continued to talk to us about how she was also a college student and knew how money was something no college student has. So she continued to tell us about the dinner for four and how it would be a good deal for us. (#169)</i></p>	<p><i>One customer often came into the coffee shop and spread out his work on a table. One day I was wiping tables and asked him what he was studying. He said architecture. . .I told him I started out in architecture. . .I asked what he wanted to design and he said community systems, which coincided with some things I was studying. We had an extended conversation then and have had similar conversations since. (#035)</i></p> <p><i>I went to the restaurant to get some lunch when the waitress came up to the table to greet my group. She started talking to the table about our orders. . .The waitress asked me about the shirt I was wearing—because my shirt has a surfing brand [on the front of it]. I said that I learned to surf while I was in Costa Rica. The waitress then said her sister went to Costa Rica also. We then started talking about Costa Rica. (#126)</i></p>
<p>Category 3: Courteous behavior</p> <p>3A. Unexpected honesty <i>We went to buy a new CD player for my car. . .we walked into the car stereo section and started comparing prices and features of different stereos. The employee came in and asked if we were finding everything, we asked a few questions, he answered. . .he seemed to be honest. We told him what we wanted to pay and he told us the differences in stereos and what we would really be getting. (#041)</i></p> <p>3B. Civility <i>Although we arrived close to closing and were spending little money, the employee was very polite. . .when he discovered they were out of large pizza shells, he brought us two medium pizzas. . .this incident stands out in my mind because I thought he extended considerable courtesy given we spent little money and we arrived when the employees were ready to go home. (#174)</i></p>	<p><i>I was busy stocking the shelves when a customer asked me where he could find something that he could store his sweaters in. I showed him our common product and he commented on how expensive the products are in the store. I agreed with him that the products are a little "pricey," but that you usually get what you pay for. I then walked him to another part of the store and showed him a product that wasn't as good, but was cheaper. . .I also suggested he could try another store located down the street. The customer told me he appreciated me being so honest and said that the expensive product was just what he needed. (#040)</i></p> <p><i>A customer's kid spilled his drink all over the table. . .I attempted to be courteous and polite, despite the fact that I had to clean up after the kid's mess. . .they seemed like nice people, and I was in a good mood that night, so I was nice. (#104)</i></p>

Table 2 (Continued)

Customer-described incidents	Employee-described incidents
<p>3C. Empathy  <i>My brakes were squeaking badly. I figured I needed new pads or rotors. When I took it to the shop the employee said not to worry—this happens a lot and it usually needs some quick cleaning. He said he'd give it a thorough check and clean it up. He offered some coffee and assured me it wouldn't take long. (#198)</i></p>	<p><i>The mother of one of our customers came into the [dental] office because her daughter had received four fillings; only two had been estimated. I told her that I completely understood why she was confused/mad. The error was on our part. . . I then told her if she had the copy of the estimation, and brought it back in, I would try to write off the difference. (#127)</i></p>
Category 4: Connecting behavior	
<p>4A. Using humor  <i>I went into the shoe store and was looking for my size when the employee there came up to me and asked if I needed some help. . . I asked him if he carried size 11 and above. . . he made a joke about how he had to carry sizes above a 10 because his wife would get mad at him if he didn't (as she wore a size 12). . . he made me feel very relaxed as he came up and smiled and cracked that joke. (#186)</i></p>	<p><i>A young girl came in for her first gynecologist exam. She was extremely nervous. I knew the experience would be a horrible one if she did not relax somehow. . . I told her the story of my very first exam I ever had. The nurse was so harsh and cold and told me in no uncertain terms what I "needed" to do. I made fun of this "starched" lady in order to point out the differences between the present and the past. . . the girl chuckled at the image of the nurse from so long ago. . . she was very relieved. (#031)</i></p>
<p>4B. Pleasant conversation  <i>I received my phone bill and the bill had problems. The lady who answered my phone call was extremely helpful and took a lot of time to help me out. . . she was very talkative. . . we had a conversation like we had met before. . . she almost made me feel like staying on the phone. (#106)</i></p>	<p><i>The customer came into the store looking for furniture and flooring. I welcomed him and asked "Is there anything I can help you with?" Also I commented on the weather to make them a little more comfortable with me. Then I introduced myself and spoke about children with him. (#443)</i></p>
<p>4C. Friendly interaction  <i>The [computer] sales rep introduced himself and started asking personal questions about where I was from and where I worked. It seemed as though he wanted to be my friend more than sell me a computer. We talked for over 5 minutes about nothing but personal things. When it came time to talk computers, I felt like I could trust him and that I could ask him questions without feeling ignorant about computers. (#201)</i></p>	<p><i>There was a family that was visiting from out of town and had never been to this restaurant. I helped them with the menu and let them know of the specials that we had for that night. They had lots of questions and I answered them all in a friendly manner. . . [later] we talked about where they were visiting from and the conversation went from there. I made sure I was friendly with them when they had questions about things on the menu. (#132)</i></p>
Category 5: Information sharing behavior	
<p>5A. Giving advice  <i>The sales manager came by. He was extremely helpful in giving me advice as to what supplies would best serve my purposes. He pointed out the weaknesses in my [equipment] and what I would need to watch out for. . . I wanted to spiff up the women's bathrooms and he showed me how to do this without spending a great deal of money. (#051)</i></p>	<p><i>A customer came to the gym inquiring about personal trainers. As manager, as well as a personal trainer, I explained her options to her. . . I explained that I had trained numerous women with the same goals (lose weight, tone muscle) and also told her about my own personal experiences with bodybuilding and weight training. I explained how a person builds muscle and loses fat. Also, I assured her that she would look and feel so much better because she started an exercise program. (#212)</i></p>
<p>5B. Imparting knowledge  <i>We wanted to look at engagement rings, but we were not too educated about them. . . We really were not sure what we were looking for so he [the employee] brought out a bunch of charts that explain the different kinds of diamonds based on their cut, clarity, etc. He went through all of the charts with us. By the end, my girlfriend and I had a better idea of what we wanted. . . Bob spent a lot of time with us explaining all of the possibilities, even though the store was busy. . . I was quite pleased with Bob's attempt to build rapport. (#412)</i></p>	<p><i>Two men came into the shop. They were interested in places where they could go back-country skiing. They were looking for guide books, maps, or any information they could get. I showed them several maps and pointed out locations and gave them some recommendations. . . before they left the store I told them I owned a few good trail maps (home made). I live virtually next door and went home to get them. The customers were very gracious. . . and asked me to go along. (#072)</i></p>
<p>5C. Asking questions to understand customer needs  <i>I was looking to purchase a computer. . . The salesman went out of his way to find out my specific needs. This shows that instead of the salesman trying to sell the most expensive computer to me, he was trying to find out which computer would best fit my needs. . . Most salespeople only want to sell you the most expensive product, but this salesman really wanted to find the computer that would be appropriate for me. (#410)</i></p>	<p><i>The customer started to come in frequently to buy supplies like feed and medicine for his horses. I inquired about his horses by asking him what breed they were, how many he had, and what he did with them. I then asked him what types of products he liked to use most on his horses so that we could make sure we kept those products in stock. (#096)</i></p>



the employee is more concerned about the customer than about making a sale; such interest appears to be very beneficial in cultivating rapport. One customer described an interaction during which her hair stylist displayed such attention to her: “Jill [*the employee*] was friendly right away. She asked me what hair style I wanted, how much I wanted cut off, and asked how I style my hair so she could get a good idea. She . . . talked to me the entire time she cut my hair. She asked if I was going to school and what my major was . . . I loved [*that*] she was actually interested in me. . . . She made me feel relaxed and comfortable.” This customer truly appreciates the interest the employee expresses in her.

Discussions of rapport in social psychology literature suggest that taking an interest in the other person helps facilitate rapport (Argyle 1990). Furthermore, such personal interest is similar to the social bonding that Bendapudi and Berry (1997) contend leads to a customer’s receptivity to relationship development in retail contexts.

### *Category 2: Common grounding behavior*

Rapport-building behaviors in the common grounding category, a second a priori category, involve situations in which the employee seeks to discover or discovers through serendipity something that he or she has in common with the customer. We classify 65 behaviors (nearly 8%) into this category. The two subcategories of common grounding behavior are identification of mutual interests and finding other similarities.

#### *Subcategory 2A: Identifying mutual interests*

With this set of behaviors, the employee identifies some common interest he or she might have with the customer to make an initial connection and keep the conversation flowing. Such mutual interests might include hobbies, hometowns, and sports teams. For example, one customer reported that while visiting a sporting goods store to look for Rollerblades, an employee “told me that he also was into skating and sometimes played hockey with his friends. We began chatting about skating stories and traded them back and forth. He even invited me to play hockey with him and his friends sometime.” This interaction clearly developed rapport between the customer and employee.

Argyle (1990) suggests knowledge of areas of mutual interest can help cultivate rapport. Identifying mutual interests increases the perceived similarity between the customer and employee; such similarity then influences the amount of trust and confidence customers have in service employees (Coulter and Coulter 2002).

#### *Subcategory 2B: Finding other similarities*

Rapport also might be cultivated through similarities that the customer and employee have, in addition to mutual interests. That is, somehow in the course of the interaction, the employee finds something he or she has in common with the customer that is not necessarily a salient issue to the purchase (e.g., both are 24 years old, both have grandparents from the same town) but still creates a connection between them. To illustrate, an employee of a retail clothing store described this interaction

with a customer: “I approached the customer and asked if she needed any help. She responded that, yes, she was trying to find an outfit to wear on a blind date and didn’t know what to wear. I mentioned to her that my sister was getting married in a few weeks as a result of a blind date and that I would be happy to help her out. She was very receptive and interested in my story.” In this incident, the customer appreciated learning about this commonality they shared and interpreted it as positive rapport-building behavior.

Previous literature suggests improved rapport when a customer perceives a similarity with a salesperson (Clark, Drew, and Pinch 2003; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; Jones et al. 1998). As the degree of similarity increases between two people, so does the degree of attraction (Bendapudi and Berry 1997; Jones et al. 1998) or relationship quality (Crosby et al. 1990) and, often, the opportunity for rapport to develop. In retail settings, similarity between the customer and employee increases the probability of a sale (Churchill et al. 1975).

### *Category 3: Courteous behavior*

Rapport-building behaviors included in Category 3 refer to situations in which the employee demonstrates genuinely courteous behavior that appears to be a natural part of his or her disposition and therefore might not be considered a behavior that is in the company’s best interests. That is, the employee’s behavior suggests he or she is truly looking out for the customer rather than trying to make a sale. We classify 107 behaviors, or 13% of the entire set of rapport-building behaviors, as courteous behavior. This category, consistent with another of the a priori behaviors suggested by existing literature, consists of three subcategories: unexpected honesty, civility, and empathy.

#### *Subcategory 3A: Unexpected honesty*

A salient feature of these behaviors is that the employee is genuinely honest in his or her discussion with the customer, in some cases to the potential short-term detriment of the organization. Such honesty, generally unexpected, leads the customer to trust the employee more and establishes rapport. For example, one customer of a retail electronics store reported: “I needed a stereo receiver. I told [*the employee*] what I thought I needed. . . . This led him to tell me about his personal experience with buying his own receiver. After he told me what he needed and what he bought, I realized that I did not need ‘everything’ that would come with a top-of-the-line receiver. More importantly, he told me of another place I could go. . . . It was refreshing to have an employee be truthful and tell me where I could find a better deal. Because of his honesty, I will always go to [*store name*] to look for electronics.”

The link between employees’ displays of honest behaviors and rapport has not received much attention in existing literature. In one of the few discussions on this topic, Wood (2006) contends that honesty may have an influential role in the development of rapport and suggests that such a relationship should be explored in further research.

### Subcategory 3B: Civility

In these rapport-building behaviors, the employee displays courteous behavior by being especially friendly, pleasant, polite, and/or helpful. The employee's actions are not necessarily perceived as an explicit attempt to gain a sale or establish a friendship, but genuine civility appears instrumental in the development of rapport between the customer and the employee. One waitress described her interaction with two customers: "I was waiting on tables and one of them was a middle-aged couple. I was polite, attentive, and cheerful. . . as they were leaving, the man thanked me for being so pleasant. . . he indicated it was nice to be around someone with such a pleasant attitude."

Some literature supports the role of civility in fostering rapport. Menon and Dubé (2000) find customers respond with joy and delight to retail salespeople who are courteous, polite, and helpful. Bettencourt, Brown, and MacKenzie (2005) also suggest that exceptionally courteous behavior represents a key component of service delivery in retail contexts, and Winsted (1997) finds that employee civility constitutes an important component of customers' service encounter evaluations. Finally, Brown and Swartz (1989) find courtesy is the dimension most often mentioned first in customer evaluations of services. These findings are consistent with the notion of cultivating rapport through employee civility in the service encounter.

### Subcategory 3C: Empathy

When an employee consoles the customer, acts with empathy, displays care and concern, or is sympathetic to the customer's plight, this genuine concern for the customer and ability to see things from the customer's viewpoint helps establish rapport. One furnace repair customer reported: "I am not very adept at furnace problems. . . . He [the employee] didn't get frustrated with me and abrupt, but validated my lack of knowledge by sharing a story of how he knew nothing about something I was familiar with."

This finding is consistent with the empathetic skills that Beatty et al. (1996) identify as salient to relationship selling in retail contexts. They posit that such empathy allows employees to "take on customer problems as their own, as well as to adapt their personality and style to the desires of their customers and to the stage of the relationship" (Beatty et al. 1996, p. 231). They also contend that empathy allows one person in the interaction to understand the other better and allows for greater intimacy – both conditions that appear well-suited for cultivating rapport. Winsted (1997) also suggests that employee caring or concern for the customer provides an important component of customers' service encounter evaluations.

### Category 4: Connecting behavior

In the rapport-building behaviors classified as connecting behaviors, the employee explicitly attempts to develop a connection with the customer. Through the employee's behavior, a bond or sense of affiliation forms. We identify 223 instances, representing 27% of the rapport-building behaviors

in our data, in which the employee attempts to connect with the customer. Three types of connecting behavior – a category not explicitly identified as a distinct rapport-building behavior in our review of the literature – compose this category: using humor, pleasant conversation, and friendly interaction.

### Subcategory 4A: Using humor

Occasionally, an employee attempts to establish rapport through the use of humor, such as by making a joke or causing the customer to laugh, snicker, or chuckle, which creates a connection and establishes rapport. One retail store employee discussed how he used humor to develop rapport with a customer: "After [the customer] approached me for some information, I asked him what kind of price range he was looking at. He replied, 'money is no object.' I then commented, 'Wow! That must be nice! You must have hit the lottery or something!' He chuckled. . . ." In this incident, the employee felt the customer responded well to his humor and that his behavior led to the development of rapport.

The literature on humor suggests it can help people understand key points, aids in relationship building, and relaxes people in moments of anxiety and tension (cf. van Dolen 2002). However, the role of humor in developing rapport appears only occasionally in previous rapport research. One study reveals that rapport can be created through joking (Clark et al. 2003), and in another study, scholars actually define rapport as "the occurrence of reciprocal laughter between the two participants" (Lavin and Maynard 2001, p. 454). van Dolen (2002) finds that humor increases the likelihood of a positive service evaluation by customers if that humor is somehow related to the situation, and Hollman and Kleiner (1997) identify humor as helpful in fostering rapport in business relationships.

### Subcategory 4B: Pleasant conversation

The behaviors in this subcategory pertain to situations in which rapport results from pleasant conversation between employees and customers. In such instances, the employee generally initiates the conversation to engage in an enjoyable interaction with the customer (e.g., asking how the customer is doing). To illustrate, one bank customer recounted an incident when she was making a deposit: "The teller began to chat. We chatted about my coat that she had complimented me on. We began to talk about fashion and shopping, and she recommended some good shopping malls and cute boutiques." The customer indicated a rapport developed with the employee as a direct result of this conversation.

Results from previous research are also consistent with this finding. Mittal and Lassar (1996, p. 105) suggest that engaging in friendly conversations creates "personal warmth in service encounters" for customers. Argyle (1990, p. 298) contends talk is "a major source" of rapport, and Winsted (1997) claims small talk and conversation that are unrelated to the business at hand help strengthen relationships between customers and employees. Clark et al. (2003) also suggest that small talk and discussion of issues not directly related to focal business provide particularly useful means of developing rapport.

#### *Subcategory 4C: Friendly interaction*

These behaviors occur in situations when the employee is particularly friendly, warm, personable, or nice while interacting with the customer, beyond what is perceived as normal in the given context. Such behavior may help make the customer feel comfortable and at ease in the setting. One respondent described an incident when she needed roadside assistance with her car: “[*The serviceman*] introduced himself and then asked for the keys so he could go out to the car and see what was going on while I stayed out of the rain. He offered to buy me something to drink while I waited and he fixed the car. He sat down and talked to me for a few minutes, and then went out with me to the car to show what he did.” This customer mentioned she had been in similar situations prior to this but never before had anyone introduced themselves. She rated the employee’s efforts at developing rapport through this friendly behavior very highly.

Winsted (1997) suggests employee friendliness during the service encounter is an important component of customers’ service encounter evaluations. Code switching, a form of improvisation or “ad libbing” in the encounter (Schau, Dellande, and Gilly 2007), represents one way that an employee might alter a normally scripted interaction to make it more enjoyable. Thus, the use of friendly interactions to cultivate rapport is consistent with the extant literature.

#### *Category 5: Information sharing behavior*

Behaviors in the final category all involve sharing or gathering information during the encounter; these behaviors are not among the a priori rapport-building behaviors we identified in our review of the literature. In these interactions, employees either attempt to share information with or gather information from the customer to understand the customer better and serve his or her needs more effectively. Providing such information can be instrumental in the development of rapport between the employee and the customer. More than 23% of the rapport-building behaviors in our data reflect information-sharing behaviors; we divide them into three subcategories: giving advice, imparting knowledge, and asking questions.

#### *Subcategory 5A: Giving advice*

Behaviors in this subcategory relate to situations in which the employee makes suggestions to the customer about the service or product or the employee provides advice or insight into matters indirectly related to the purchase situation. In such situations, customers appear to perceive the provision of such information as influential for developing rapport. For example, one employee respondent provided advice about his store’s sail inventory: “The customer. . . and particularly his wife, felt uncomfortable and overpowered when sailing their new boat in strong winds. I asked them specifically what aspect of heavy weather sailing scared them [*and*] I talked about my own experiences of sailing in heavy weather and made recommendations on sails to sell and sails to buy.” This employee felt that the exchange of such information allowed him to establish a rapport with this couple.

Giving of advice to develop rapport has not been addressed much in the literature, though Menon and Dubé (2000) find that

customers respond with joy and delight to retail salespeople who take the time to explain products and make suggestions. However, a connection between giving such advice and rapport has not been established in previous studies in retail settings.

#### *Subcategory 5B: Imparting knowledge*

Another type of rapport-building behavior included in the information-sharing category consists of situations in which the employee’s sharing of his or her own expertise and knowledge about a certain subject influences the development of rapport. In particular, sharing such information leads respondents to believe that an initial connection has been made in establishing rapport. To illustrate, one customer reported: “I entered the store to look at saddles. Immediately the salesman came over to talk about what I wanted. . . he was very knowledgeable in sizing and use of saddles.” In this case, the customer felt that rapport developed as a result of this sharing of knowledge.

The imparting of knowledge by an employee helps demonstrate expertise, which contributes to the credibility of the employee and frequently to relationship development (Bendapudi and Berry 1997; Crosby et al. 1990), interaction quality (Jacobs et al. 2001), and trust in the employee (Liu and Leach 2001). However, we are aware of only one study (Jones et al. 1998) suggesting a direct link between employee expertise and rapport development.

#### *Subcategory 5C: Asking questions to understand customer needs*

The final rapport-building behavior involves a process in which the employee asks specific questions to determine what the customer is really seeking from the company. These questions are intended to help the employee gain a better understanding of specific customer needs, but they also prompt customers to perceive that the employee is truly listening to their answers, which makes those customers feel more comfortable. For example, one hardware store customer reported: “I was looking for a bolt to fix a piece of machinery. . . the employee asked me if I needed help and when I told him what I needed he asked me what type of machinery it was and what, if any, were the certain types of metal it needed to be for strength. We then talked more about the machinery and the problems it had and other problems that may occur and how to fix them or how to prevent them. . . I appreciated his knowledge of the machinery and his offering of ideas of how to prevent other problems.” This customer thus indicated that because the employee asked questions to better understand his problem, rapport was established.

A customer-oriented selling approach, which includes asking questions and attempting to determine the customer’s needs, relates positively to satisfaction with the salesperson (Goff et al. 1997). McKechnie, Grant, and Bagaria (2007) find that employees who listen to retail customers more than they talk and ask for clarification are better received by those customers. Campbell et al. (2006) also suggest listening is a key tactic for managing rapport. Although these studies support a connection between listening and rapport, we know of no studies directly linking questions to the development of rapport.

These five categories represent behaviors used by employees and perceived by customers as instrumental in building employee–customer rapport. As suggested throughout this discussion, strong similarities mark three of the four types of rapport behaviors identified in the literature review. We also provide a more complete examination of how the five categories identified in the analysis of our CIT data relate to the four a priori categories in the Discussion section.

#### *Simple versus multiple rapport-building strategies*

When we began the study, we did not anticipate multiple rapport-building behaviors within individual critical incidents, yet in more than two-thirds of reports, two or more rapport-building behaviors appear. Thus, we examine the data to determine any differences in customer perceptions of rapport when employees engage in single versus multiple rapport-building behaviors. We classify each critical incident into one of three groups: a “simple strategy” incident if only one rapport-building behavior is identified within the incident, a “two-strategy” incident if it contains two rapport-building behaviors, and a “compound strategy” incident if it includes three or more. This approach is similar to Keaveney’s (1995) investigation of customer switching behavior. Of the 192 critical incidents cited by customers in our sample, 29% ( $n = 55$ ) contain a single rapport-building behavior, 37% ( $n = 72$ ) are two-strategy behaviors, and 34% ( $n = 65$ ) include compound rapport-building behaviors.

To assess the differences among these three types in terms of customers’ perceptions of overall rapport, we use a single-item measure (“I experienced good rapport with the employee”) included in our customer data.<sup>4</sup> Customers report relatively high perceptions of rapport, regardless of the number of behaviors employed; means are greater than 5.90. Although the means for overall rapport perceptions across the three types of incidents (simple, two, and compound) increase as the number of rapport-building behaviors increases, they are not significantly different.

## Discussion

#### *Contribution of the study*

This study attempts to determine if the four types of rapport-building behaviors identified in academic literature also are used by retail employees in retail settings. The classification scheme we develop from our CIT analysis includes five general types of behaviors; three of them roughly approximate the suggestions in existing literature for developing rapport, another category of employee behaviors is not confirmed, and two categories of behaviors emerge that have not received attention in literature.

<sup>4</sup> The unit of analysis for the data presented in Table 1 ( $n = 824$  rapport-building behaviors) is the specific behavior; however, we explore the impact of the number of strategies by using the incident as the unit of analysis ( $n = 192$  customer-reported critical incidents).

We have strong confidence in our findings, because we collect data from both employees and customers – and find similar results across groups.

#### *Categories of rapport-building behaviors*

##### *Confirmation of three rapport-building categories*

The category we label *uncommonly attentive behavior* is very similar to the attentive behavior suggested in prior literature. Retail employees who give special attention or favors to customers, make a point to recognize them, or display intense personal interest in them beyond what is normally expected are affiliated with attentive interactions (cf. van Dolen, de Ruyter, and Lemmink 2002). Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) even suggest that the intense mutual interest brought about by focused involvement with the other party can lead to rapport in a relationship. Uncommonly attentive behavior also emerges as the rapport-building behavior most frequently identified by customers, suggesting such behavior is very salient for use in commercial settings.

Our *common grounding behavior* category matches the common grounding rapport-building behavior suggested in extant literature. Our findings further indicate employees attempt to discover areas of mutual interest or identify other similarities they have with customers to help cultivate rapport. However, this behavior is the least frequently reported among the five categories of behaviors, suggesting that in commercial settings, it is more difficult to use to cultivate rapport.

The third type of rapport-building behavior we also find in our data is *courteous behavior*. The three types of courteous behaviors we identify – unexpected honesty, civility, and empathy – are consistent with the types of courteous behaviors suggested previously. Such behavior, interpreted by the customer as sincere and an attempt to look out for his or her best interests rather than those of the company, appears useful for cultivating rapport in commercial settings.

##### *Lack of confirmation for one rapport-building category*

Although other literature suggests that imitation of others can help establish rapport in a relationship, we find no evidence of *imitative behavior* by retail employees. There are several possible explanations for this finding. Perhaps employees do not often use imitation because the role expectations and behaviors associated with retailers and customers preclude its use as a rapport-building strategy in this setting. Alternatively, perhaps imitation is too subtle, such that customers do not notice employees using imitation techniques in a service encounter. Similarly, employees may not be aware of their use of imitative behavior; Chartrand and Bargh (1999) suggest mimicry can be nonconscious and still lead to rapport. Or perhaps, as some have argued, rapport leads to mimicry rather than mimicry leading to rapport (cf. Lakin et al. 2003). Finally, the CIT method may not be well suited for identifying imitative behavior, and a different methodology could be needed to capture rapport-building imitative behaviors in service encounters, if they exist.

### *Additional rapport-building categories*

We identify two categories of rapport-building behaviors in commercial settings that have not received attention in previous literature. Our *connecting behavior* category does not appear unequivocally in any of the four categories of rapport-building behaviors previously identified. The behaviors we assign to this category include employees using humor, engaging in pleasant conversation, and having friendly interactions with customers. Through such behaviors, employees try to develop some sort of connection with their customers, similar to that which occurs when they attempt to identify something they have in common. However, the connecting behavior in these incidents is not focused on common interests, characteristics, or experiences but instead on a mutually enjoyable service encounter experience. Our findings suggest these connecting behaviors, which are primarily communication based, help employees put the customer at ease. Perhaps this connecting behavior appears in commercial settings because such communication can be interjected into a service encounter without any appreciable lengthening of the transaction. We also note that connecting behavior is the rapport-building behavior most frequently mentioned by employees.

Our final category of behaviors – which we label *information-sharing behavior* – has not, to our knowledge, been suggested explicitly as a rapport-building behavior before. Information-sharing behavior includes situations in which the employee gives advice to the customer, shares knowledge in a particular area of interest with the customer, or asks detailed questions to understand the customer's needs better. In these incidents, the focus is primarily on addressing the customer's specific situation rather than the employee developing a personal relationship with the customer. However, the employee's desire to either gather or share information with the customer serves, in effect, as a path to developing rapport. Existing literature provides only indirect evidence that information sharing can influence an employee's attempt to develop rapport. Specifically, information sharing represents a key characteristic of successful salespersons (Reid, Plank, and Minton 1997), and research in social psychology suggests information sharing can lead to greater mimicry and, perhaps, rapport (see Lakin et al. 2003).

### *Effectiveness of multiple rapport-building behaviors*

A somewhat surprising finding is that rapport is not enhanced when employees use more rapport-building behaviors. In terms of cultivating rapport, interactions during which employees engage in multiple rapport-building behaviors do not result in greater perceptions of rapport than those with only a single behavior. This finding suggests that employees can concentrate on a particular, situation-appropriate strategy rather than attempting multiple rapport-building strategies.

### *Managerial implications*

The identification of a set of common rapport-building behaviors in commercial contexts provides retail managers with insight into potential strategies for developing rapport with customers. Managers can use the behaviors reported in this study as a foundation for a training program designed to increase rapport-

building behaviors among employees. Employees should be encouraged to engage in pleasant conversation, give advice, ask questions, or use humor as they interact with customers. Training also should emphasize that rapport can be established in a single encounter and provide scripted opening lines, questions, or jokes. Rapport building further might be addressed in training programs through role playing, scenarios, and even technology. For example, one company uses technology to create templates of facial features, such as joy, surprise, anger, and sadness, to help employees determine a customer's emotional state (Bennett 2002). These "emotional templates" enable retail managers and providers to understand their customers better and establish higher levels of rapport.

Employees who engage in multiple rapport-building behaviors do not necessarily create greater rapport than those who use just one such behavior though. Perhaps employees should be encouraged to focus on identifying which rapport-building behavior is most appropriate for a particular customer or situation, as opposed to using a "shotgun" approach that entails several techniques. Firms that can convince employees to employ one type of rapport-building behavior, and do it very well, may benefit just as much as firms that encourage multiple rapport-building behaviors. However, it also might be prudent for firms to assess which behavior prompts the greatest responsiveness among customers in given encounters and determine which rapport-building behaviors are most appropriate in specific contexts.

The results of our study also provide managers with guidance for developing strategies to cultivate rapport. For example, employees can be taught opening lines or conversation prompts to help identify commonalities or engage customers in pleasant conversation (cf. Chase and Stewart 1994; Luthans and Davis 1990). To facilitate communication behaviors, managers might design the service or retail environment appropriately. One U.S. restaurant chain, for example, encourages waiters and waitresses to squat next to – or even sit at – the customer's table and spend a couple of minutes interacting; this action allows them to establish better eye contact with customers and provides the opportunity for engaging interactions. To provide similar opportunities, several banks have eliminated traditional teller windows and replaced them with business desks, where employees and customers can sit comfortably as they interact. In addition, to manage common grounding behavior, companies might create situations that prompt employees and customers to find things in common. To illustrate, an organization might seek to hire employees who are demographically similar to the firm's customers. Ewing et al. (2001) contend that rapport in business settings often improves when there is a demographic similarity between clients and employees. Finally, hiring employees who are likely to have common interests with a large segment of the firm's customer base can aid in discovering common ground and further the development of rapport.

### *Research limitations*

We would be remiss if we did not point out some limitations of our research. First, we acknowledge the limitations of the

CIT method (cf. Gremler 2004), including the assumption that respondents adequately understand the phenomena in question and can provide relevant responses, its reliance on participants' recollections of incidents, and a bias toward more recent incidents. Second, our data refer to situations with good rapport and do not identify any negative aspects of the phenomenon, which might limit our study findings (i.e., commonly used but ineffective tactics may not be identified). Third, we focus on situations in which rapport building is appropriate; however, rapport is not a panacea for employee–customer interaction issues, and we do not contend that every interaction demands (or desires) rapport. Further research might develop a typology of situations to examine when customers prefer interactions involving rapport.

Fourth, rapport is a dyadic construct, in that it requires two parties. Yet we investigate it from a single point of view. Although we consider rapport-building behaviors from both customer and employee perspectives, we do not capture different perspectives of the *same* incident. Additional studies should investigate both parties in the dyad of a single incident to obtain a complete picture of rapport (cf. Ewing et al. 2001). Fifth, the CIT method may not be well suited to capture the types of imitative behavior identified in previous studies of rapport. For example, our study does not reveal whether imitative behaviors actually appear in service encounters; observational methods may be better suited to capture such behaviors. Sixth and finally, we did not distinguish between rapport-building behaviors in ongoing versus initial encounters. The benefits of establishing customer rapport and the most effective method for doing so may differ in interactions of varying length and intensity. Further research should investigate whether the type and/or effectiveness of such behaviors differ when the customer has no prior relationship with the retailer (i.e., “first” encounters) versus when they are engaged in a long-term, ongoing encounter. For example, researchers might compare short-term, potentially recurring convenience store transactions with long-term, relationship-driven financial services.

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### Appendix A. Instructions for coders

#### A.1. Critical incident technique coding instructions

1. You will be provided with a set of written descriptions of a variety of service encounters. Each “story” or “event” is recorded on a standardized questionnaire. Each service encounter questionnaire reflects the events and behaviors associated with a memorable service encounter. The focus of the study is on identifying various rapport-building techniques that service employees use with customers. Two types of questionnaires were used, one completed by customer respondents and the other completed by employee respondents.

2. You will be asked to identify *each* employee behavior in an incident that was an attempt to establish rapport with the customer. Sorting rules and definitions of fourteen distinct types (or categories) of such behaviors are detailed below.
3. You should read through the *entire* service encounter before you attempt to identify the various employee rapport-building behaviors. If an incident does not appear to have any of the fourteen behaviors described below, put it aside. In addition, do not attempt to categorize incidents that do not meet the basic criteria. In particular, an incident must: (1) include an employee–customer interaction, (2) reference a specific service encounter, (3) provide sufficient information to adequately assess the incident, and (4) contain an apparent attempt by the employee at building rapport with the customer. If it does not meet *all* of these criteria, set it aside.
4. Once you have read the incident, identify all of the rapport-building behaviors and record those behaviors on the provided data entry sheet.

### Appendix B. CIT classification system definitions

*Category 1. (Uncommonly attentive behavior)* The employee provides attention perceived by the customer as unusual, out-of-the-ordinary, or unexpected.

- A. *Atypical actions.* The employee is perceived by the customer as going out of his or her way to do deeds or go “above and beyond the call of duty” to please the customer or offering any extra help that is not necessary. Such special attention appears to help establish rapport with the customer.
- B. *Personal recognition.* The employee indicates recognition of the customer through the recollection of a name or remembering specifics or relevant facts about that particular customer (or the customer’s family). Through such recognition, the customer feels as though the employee has “connected” with him or her.
- C. *Intense personal interest.* The employee demonstrates an intense level of interest in the customer as a person. Such interest in the customer’s situation is perceived by the customer as unexpected and out-of-the-ordinary and as an indication that the employee’s primary concern is for the customer (or his or her well-being), not making a sale.

*Category 2. (Common grounding behavior)* The employee seeks to discover (or discovers through serendipity) something he or she has in common with the customer.

- A. *Identifying mutual interests.* The employee tries to find a common interest with the customer to establish rapport (hobbies, hometown, sports teams, etc.). The employee searches for any common interest that both the customer and employee might have to make an initial connection and keep the conversation flowing.
- B. *Finding other similarities.* These behaviors refer to employees identifying other things the customer and employee have

in common besides interests (e.g., both just spent \$20 on gasoline, both are 24 years old, both began taking swimming lessons when they were 6 months old).

**Category 3. (Courteous behavior)** During the interaction, the employee demonstrates courteous behavior that appears to be a natural part of the employee's disposition. Such behavior is interpreted by the customer as sincere and truly looking out for the customer's best interests rather than the company's.

- A. *Unexpected honesty.* The employee is genuinely honest in his or her discussion when answering questions or in other general discussion. Such honesty leads to customer trust in the employee and the establishment of rapport.
- B. *Civility.* The employee displays courteous behavior by being especially pleasant, polite, and/or helpful. Here, the employee's actions are not necessarily perceived as an explicit attempt to establish a relationship.
- C. *Empathy.* The employee consoles the customer, acts with empathy, shows concern, displays care, and/or is apologetic about the customer's plight. The employee's concern for the customer and ability to see things from the customer's viewpoint help establish rapport.

**Category 4. (Connecting behavior)** In the normal course of the service encounter, the employee explicitly attempts to develop a connection with the customer.

- A. *Using humor.* The employee attempts to establish rapport through the use of humor. The employee makes a joke or gets the customer to laugh or smile to make a connection or establish rapport.
- B. *Pleasant conversation.* Rapport appears to be established through the employee's pleasant conversation with the customer. Although the employee initiates the conversation, it is not necessarily with any particular purpose in mind other than to engage in an enjoyable discussion or chat with the customer (e.g., asking how the customer is doing, engaging in small talk).
- C. *Friendly interaction.* The employee is particularly friendly, warm, personable, or nice in the process of serving the customer, beyond what is perceived as normal in this context. Such behavior, generally perceived as part of the employee's job, may help make the customer feel comfortable and/or put him or her at ease in this setting.

**Category 5. (Information sharing behavior)** The employee attempts to share information with or gather information from the customer in the interaction to understand the customer more thoroughly and better serve him or her.

- A. *Giving advice.* The employee makes suggestions to the customer about the service or product. Also, the employee may provide advice or insight into matters only indirectly related to the purchase situation.
- B. *Imparting knowledge.* Rapport develops as the employee shares his or her own expertise and knowledge about a certain

subject with the customer. The sharing of such information leads the customer to believe an initial connection was made in establishing rapport.

- C. *Asking questions to understand customer and needs.* Rapport is cultivated through the employee asking questions (beyond "can I help you?") to find out what the customer is really looking for from the company and attempting to gain a better understanding of specific customer needs. The customer may also perceive that the employee carefully listens to the answers to such questions to make the customer feel more comfortable.

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