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Leo, Cheryl and Russell-Bennett, Rebekah (2007) Customer-oriented Defiance (COD): Exploring Righteous, Sacrificing and Sneaky Behaviours. In *Proceedings 2007 Australia And New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference (ANZMAC)*, pages pp. 3584-3590, Dunedin, New Zealand.

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# **Customer-Oriented Defiance (COD): Exploring Righteous, Sacrificing and Sneaky Behaviours**

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## **Abstract**

This paper qualitatively explores the phenomenon of Customer-Oriented Defiance (COD) and reports the implications to theory and research. The study involves in-depth interviews with 21 frontline service employees. The results show that frontline employees in service industries exhibited COD. They exist in three forms; righteous, sacrificial and sneaky behaviours. The findings provide the foundation for future research and extend existing literature on positive deviance into a services marketing context.

## **Introduction**

In today's competitive environment, frontline employees can be the source of competitive advantage to service organisations with their ability to solve problems at the point of occurrence. This often requires employees to go above and beyond their call of duty. Extra-role behaviours has been found to be crucial in services and linked to important service outcomes such as customer satisfaction, sales, loyalty and perceived service quality (Payne and Webber, 2006; Schneider et al., 2006). Nevertheless, such behaviours can result in an over-generosity of 'giving away the store' or over-servicing customers, for example, an employee may recover a customer with excessive benefits. This could be harmful to the organisation's profitability. Due to the intangible nature of services, service-oriented behaviours can be hard to manage because they tend to be hard to specify and fall out of formal role requirements (Morrison, 1996). Frontline employees also face differing role expectations from both customer and organisation in such unsolicited actions (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990). Hence, it is important to understand the complexities of these behaviours to manage them efficiently. Till date, research on extra-role behaviours has predominantly focused on generic service behaviours, for example voluntarily assisting customers. This is superficial considering that the enactments of these behaviours are likely not straight forward and require frontline employees to serve customers in resourceful or deviant ways, for example, employees may have to act organisationally inconsistent to fight for benefits for the customer. In this paper, COD is proposed to be a type of extra-role behaviour that places the customers' interests above the organisation. This involves rule and norm breaking instances that may put the frontline employee at risk. While positive/constructive deviance studies have addressed deviance types of customer beneficial behaviours, these studies extend this benefit to include other stakeholders, e.g. colleagues and the self. Hence, they do not adequately portray the range and depth of understanding in service behaviours. We propose the phenomenon of COD to provide a more comprehensive range of extra-role deviant behaviours that considers solely customers' interests in service exchanges. By doing so, this paper seeks to answer the research question of: *What is Customer-Oriented Defiance (COD)?*

## Customer-Oriented Defiance

Customer-Oriented Defiance (COD) is preliminarily defined as “*a frontline employee engaging in behaviours beyond the call of duty that represents the best interests of the customer, which may or may not be functional to the organisation.*” This definition focuses on three aspects including extra-role, customer interests and organisationally functional or dysfunctional. This definition is derived based on a synthesis of three streams of literature: extra-role behaviour, pro-customer behaviour and positive/constructive deviance. The first stream of literature is extra-role behaviours. In this paper, COD is conceptualised as a type of discretionary pro-customer behaviour mainly because in-role behaviours are usually organisationally functional (Brief and Motowildlo, 1986). In contrast, COD could contain dysfunctional behaviours. Previous research has investigated extra-role behaviours with a service delivery focus (Bettencourt, Gwinner and Meuter, 2001; González and Garazo, 2006). These behaviours are more generic and include behaviours such as acting in a conscientious manner involving customer service, being vocal advocates to outsiders and taking individual initiative in serving. Overall, they are more affiliative and passive in nature and are reported to aid the effective functioning of the organisation.

The second stream of literature is pro-customer behaviour. The notion of pro-customer behaviours can be found in a variety of work such as customer advocacy, customer orientation and benevolence behaviours. Extensive research on each of these behaviours generally places the customer as the key beneficiary of the behaviour where frontline employees placing customer interests ahead of self or organisational interests. To briefly illustrate; customer advocacy is a strategy that involves putting customers at the forefront (Urban 2004; 2005). This involves elements of open, honest and complete information (Urban 2004; 2005). Customer orientation focus on behaviours that is high in concern for customers and low in pressure selling (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Kelley and Hoffman, 1997). Similarly, the benevolence dimension within the trust literature reflects a motivation to place customer’s interests ahead of self interests as a form of trust (Sirdeshmukh, Singh and Sabol, 2002). In all, these behaviours demonstrate similarities of service employees refraining from opportunism through the customer. This discussion on pro-customer behaviours reflects different types of service behaviours frontline employees’ exhibit in favour of customers. However, these studies do not address the complicated nature of behaviours in service interactions. This arises from the presence of customers in service delivery and the constraint in resources imposed by management. This paradox is described as a dilemma of serving “two bosses’ at the same time (Singh, 2000; Shamir, 1980). This paper overcomes this simplistic notion by acknowledging that frontline employees do side with customer’s interests and exercise their own discretion in ways that can be less desired.

The third stream of literature is positive/constructive deviance. Constructive deviance is defined as voluntary behaviour that violates significant organisational norms and in doing so, contributes to the well-being of an organisation, its members or both (Galperin, 2002). Positive deviance is defined as intentional behaviours that depart from the norms of a reference group in honourable ways (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004). As opposed to organisational norms, pro-social rule-breaking is a form of positive deviance that focuses on the intentional violation of formally enforced policy, regulation or prohibition for stakeholders (Morrison, 2006). The primary drive in violating rules is to benefit others rather than oneself. These deviant behaviours are functional and constructive to others (Galperin and Burke, 2006). The conceptualisations emphasises the virtues of these behaviours (Dehler and

Welsh, 1993; Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004; Tarantino, 2005) although they are unauthorised (breaking formal rules or norms) and likely to be detrimental to the organisation. Hence, the studies show initial support for the idea that employees exhibit non-conforming behaviours for the benefit of customers (Galperin, 2002; Morrison, 2006). Despite this focus, the range of specific behaviours directed at the customer is limiting and not well understood, for example, the type of risks undertaken by the service employee. This paper fills this gap by examining the customer as a sole beneficiary of these behaviours and proposes a wider range of specific behaviours by integrating three literature streams.

## Methodology

An exploratory qualitative study was undertaken. In-depth interviews are appropriate for this study as COD is a complex and understudied area in services marketing. A non-probability, convenience sample of 21 frontline employees from various service industries in Australian capital cities were recruited for the study. *Table 1* shows a summary of the respondents. The sampling was conducted until there was behaviours were repetitive and when a clear definition of the phenomenon was derived. The interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour and were primarily conducted in respondent's place of business. They were audio-taped and subsequently verbatim transcribed. The interviews were conducted using critical incidence technique. Participants were asked to recall service experiences that were out of their role, in the best's interests of their customers and which may be detrimental to their organisation's interests. Paraphrasing and probing questions were asked to encourage free flow discussion on narratives and specific examples to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The questions were designed to reduce the inhibitions of participants due to the sensitivity of the topic. The interview data were analysed with manual context analysis and using NVivo software. Initially, the transcripts were read and key themes were highlighted. Segments of the transcripts relating to displayed behaviours were identified. The analysis was interpretative and conducted using inductive reasoning and comparative methods (e.g. Miles and Huberman 1994). Firstly, across-persons analysis was conducted on themes that would help explain and formulate the types of behaviours. Secondly, the analysis focused on individual interviews to uncover both similarities and differences of behavioural patterns across informants. Constant reference to the literature helped refine the initial definition.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

Retail - Male Aged 21; Male Aged 24	Book Publisher – Male Aged 38
Hotel Concierge – Male Aged 25	Bank Manager – Male Aged 63
Travel Consultant – Female Aged 45; Female Aged 32	Business Banker – Male Aged 27
Insurance Customer Service – Male Aged 25	Real estate agent – Male Aged 67
Health Fitness/Gym Customer Service – Female Aged 21	Accountant – Male Aged 26
Restaurant Waiter – Male Aged 24; Café Waiter Male Aged 23	Financial Planner – Female Aged 54
Telecommunications Call Centre Service - Female Aged 20	Financial Services Receptionist - Female Aged 42
Health Equipment Call Centre Service– Male Aged 31	Education (University) Receptionist – Female Aged 52
Travel Emergency Call Centre Service – Male Aged 29	Healthcare Receptionist- Female Aged 25

## Findings of Study

The literature definition has changed based on the emerging data. The new definition of COD is, “*frontline employees exhibiting purposeful behaviours that break rules or norms of the organisation to represent the best interests of customers, by doing so going beyond the expectations and duties of their roles.*” The added dimensions to the definition include

deliberate and purposeful acts and rule-breaking nature of the behaviours. Also, the key aspects of extra-role behaviours, pro-customer and positive deviance were observed and retained. The results show that COD do exist and can exist in several forms. COD behaviours appear to take the form of subtle rebellion behaviours rather than severe behaviours which threaten the well-being of the organisation or others; hence *defiance* was a more appropriate term than deviance. Consider these comments by participants that highlight the tame nature of these behaviours with minor consequences. The business banker and the retail assistant comments; *“If they knew I was not charging the fees, yes you will get into a little bit of trouble... oh not too much, get a slap on the wrist and get told to charge the fee,”* and *“Not at all... because I know that they are away from me ... they can’t really fire me for that. All they are going to do is say ‘oh why did you do that sort of thing?’”*

The interviews further show that there are three qualitatively distinct conceptions of COD; these three types are labelled in this paper as *righteous*, *sacrificial* and *sneaky behaviours*. The first set of behaviours is named *righteous behaviours* and ‘righteous’ term means morally right or justifiable (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007). These behaviours occur internal to the organisation and have social risks for the employee. The nature of these types of behaviours is alike challenging behaviours that involve organisational participants on customer ideas and issues. They are change-oriented and can damage social relationships (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). For instance, voice behaviours are challenging promotive behaviours that are constructive and intended to improve. These behaviours of righteous nature seem to arise because employees take the moral high ground for the customer because it evokes their sense of justice. Examples of *righteous behaviours* include lobbying for support with co-workers for customers, building a case for or defending customers and rejecting personal gains.

The health fitness customer service described how she spoke up for a customer to protect her interests. *“There was one lady who was really sick...she’d been in hospital and out, and wanted to cancel her membership ... So I just kind of took that to Miranda and said ‘you know, I know that normally there would be cancellation fees but in this case, I think that ... there’s always extenuating circumstances ...”* This behaviour seems to defy norms in the fitness centre that encourages employees to be sceptical towards membership cancellations. Next, the real estate agent built a case for customers to the owners because the rental agreement wasn’t a fair deal for tenants. *“So they wanted to go to the small claims tribunal to get the customers thrown out and I said, ‘you got no grounds’ and usually I keep people records,... like example, the polished floors..., I said, ‘they can patch to some extent but it can’t be identical ... you can’t expect them to pay for the whole lot for a soft floor.’ He finally agreed with me and he never pushed it...”* Lastly, the bank manager suggests that there are frontline who take on personal risks and work ‘outside the parameters’ to lobby for support for customers: *“In your case, it seems to be that it was going pretty well and truly, cause if it was a car loan, it has to go to someone else to be approved, this person you were talking to.. had to convince this approving officer, somewhere over there that you were a good risk and you were going to get this money... it’s outside the parameters and the people, oh I shouldn’t say you got pretty favourable treatment but in reality you probably did.”* In all, these behaviours appear to be provocative and can cause social losses such as organisational commitment, friction within workgroups and loss of control by the organisation.

The second set of behaviours is *sacrificial behaviours*. To sacrifice means to give up something one values (Oxford Dictionary, 2007). These are behaviours targeted directly at the customer and incur some form of personal sacrifice (loss) by the frontline employee. They are

similar to altruistic behaviours where act due to high concern and empathy (Piliavin and Charng, 1990). Some examples of such helping behaviours include physical help and providing personal resources (time and money) to customers. The following responses demonstrate these behavioural patterns. Firstly, the telecommunications call centre service personnel relates her previous experience as a travel agent on having witnessed her co-worker provide personal resources to a customer due to the situation. It was an unapproved action but intended to improve the customers' travel experience, she relates; *"We were both leading this tour overseas and one of the customers and that tour got robbed and it was like over a thousand dollars but out of her duty, my fellow tour leader decided to give money out of her own pocket to help the customer when it's in our protocol not to do that specifically."* Secondly, a waiter out illustrates how he personally delivered a wallet knowing that it was important to the customer, he states; *"Some lady actually left her wallet in our restaurant and they were tourists and they went from our restaurant on a bus ... .. but she had no way of getting back ...and I simple picked up the wallet and walked out."* Taken together, these behaviours indicate positive qualities of the frontline employee; however they can incur personal losses to the employee and create losses for the organisation in terms of inconsistent service practices and customer loyalty towards one service worker.

The third and final set of behaviours is *sneaky behaviours* and to be sneaky means to be furtive or sly (Oxford Dictionary, 2007). The data indicates that these behaviours involve employees defying guidelines because they disagree with existing processes and outcomes that disadvantage customers. These behaviours are generally covert and directed at the customer. These behaviours have potential economic losses to the organisation; they include behaviours such as referring customer to competitors, adapting customer service and service recovery procedures, using company resources to service the customer, informing customers on the truth to products and services, providing inside information to customers and waiving of fees and charges. Consider these behaviours exhibited by frontline employees: The retail sales assistant demonstrates his service integrity by being blatantly honest with the customer knowingly that it was discreet unapproved behaviour, he describes; *"If they come into and buy shoes or a t-shirt or something but I know that what we have in store is not right for them, ... then I'll express my opinion 'I don't know this is the best idea, maybe you should go for Foot Locker, which is a little bit more sporty, we sell more casual clothes here."* The next example illustrates a business banker who disagreed with nonsensical fees and covertly waives these fees to retain his customers *"... Normally the customer would be charged and they will ring up saying we have missed the statement number 274, can you get that fax over to me? It's supposed to cost eight dollars per page .... I never charge customers, I'm supposed to do it ... it's like my little concession I give the customer..."* The travel customer relations personnel explained how he tried to source cheap air tickets for the customer, which were not generally acceptable solutions. He explains; *"...this guy made a booking in November ... of course the price has gone up. So I went to the airlines and said 'do you guys have any sneaky ones we can do maybe even get it ticketed in Singapore ...like it's not illegal but just a little bit dodgy and they said no sorry we don't..."* These covert behaviours signify some resentment to the organisation and high loyalty towards the customer.

## Conclusions

This paper has provided exploratory insights towards the conceptualisation of COD. The results found that COD can exist in three distinct forms of righteous, sacrificial and sneaky

behaviours. These behaviours are differentiated based on the type of motivation towards the customer the costs which are incurred.

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