

Walk A Mile in Their Shoes: Perspective-Taking as an Intervention for Difficult Customer Interactions

How does customer-focused perspective-taking influence employees' affective reactions and behaviors during difficult customer interactions in the hospitality industry?

This study by Lindsey Lee, published in the Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research, examines how customer-focused perspective-taking—employees taking the customer's point of view—can modify employees' emotional responses and behaviors during difficult customer interactions. The research draws on affective events theory (AET), which links workplace events to affective reactions that influence employee attitudes and behaviors. Customer mistreatment typically provokes negative emotions like anger, leading to retaliation or withholding customer compensation. The study tests whether perspective-taking can reduce anger, increase empathy, and subsequently increase the use of customer compensation as a service recovery tool.

Using a between-subject experimental design with 128 frontline hotel managers, the study finds that customer-focused perspective-taking significantly decreases anger and increases empathy toward customers. Mediation analysis reveals that increased empathy, rather than decreased anger, mediates the positive effect of perspective-taking on customer compensation. This suggests empathy plays a critical role in encouraging employees to offer compensation rather than retaliate.

The findings extend AET by showing that affective reactions can be changed at a within-person level to improve episodic performance. The study highlights the potential for perspective-taking training as a practical intervention to help hospitality employees better manage negative customer encounters, improve service recovery, and enhance customer satisfaction. It emphasizes the need for organizations to integrate such training into employee development programs to equip staff with tools beyond technical skills for managing difficult customers.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- Customer-focused perspective-taking reduces employee anger and increases empathy toward difficult customers.
- Increased empathy mediates the positive impact of perspective-taking on customer compensation as a service recovery tool.
- Perspective-taking is a practical training intervention to enhance hospitality employees' management of negative customer interactions.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Hospitality Managers
- Frontline Service Employees
- HR Professionals

CONTACT US:

- Lindsey Lee, Assistant Professor, School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management
lindsey.lee@temple.edu
- Walk A Mile in Their Shoes: Perspective-Taking as an Intervention for Difficult Customer Interactions
- Journal: Hospitality and Tourism Research
- Article Link:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348020986840>