REACH OUT AND TOUCH YOUR CUSTOMER

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Non-verbal communication is an important topic for the hospitality industry, because the non-verbal messages that we send to customers can have more potent effects than do our verbal messages. For example, researchers have found that non-verbal behaviors have five times the impact of verbal messages on judgments of a communicator's friendliness and liking for the message recipient (Argyle, 1988, pgs. 90-92). To the extent that we care about the messages we send to customers, then we need to better understand and manage non-verbal communication.

One non-verbal behavior that has received little attention within the industry is interpersonal touching. We often encourage employees to establish eye contact with customers, to smile at customers, to nod their heads up and down when selling to customers and even to squat down next to customers' tables. However, we rarely (if ever), encourage employee touching of customers. This is unfortunate because touching is a powerful way of communicating our caring and liking for one another (Argyle, 1988; Montagu, 1971).

One reason touching is not more frequently encouraged within the industry is that many managers fear their customers might react negatively to being touched. However, research suggests that such fears are ungrounded and that consumers respond positively, not negatively, when touched by employees who are serving them. In retail store settings, briefly touching customers has been shown to increase the customers' shopping times, store evaluations and purchase amounts (Hornik, 1992; Smith, Grier & Willis, 1982). Similar effects have also been observed in hospitality settings. Restaurant customers who have been briefly touched by a server have been found to evaluate the server more favorably, to evaluate the restaurant more favorably, and to leave the server larger tips (Hornik, 1992; Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986).

The research on employee touching of customers described above has found that consumers' positive reactions to being touched generalize across the sex of the employee doing the touching, across the sex of the customer being touched, and across the type and geographic location of the retail setting (Hornik, 1992). However, it is not clear if these effects generalize across different touch durations or across different customer age groups.

Existing research on touching in commercial settings has involved touches that were described as brief or as lasting only one to one and one-half seconds (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Hornik, 1992; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986). It is possible that touches of longer duration will produce different results. According to Michael Argyle (1988), the positive effects of touch, gaze, proximity and other non-verbal behaviors on liking occur ...only up to a point: there is a normal and comfortable range for each of these variables, and a person who comes too close or gazes too much, produces increased, physiological arousal and is liked less" (p. 90). The normal and comfortable range of touching in commercial settings may only be one to two seconds. Touching customers for even a few seconds longer than this might backfire and provoke negative rather than positive, reactions from the customers.

Furthermore, no existing study of touching in commercial settings has examined age differences in consumers' reactions to being touched (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Hornik, 1992; Smith et. al., 1982; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986). This oversight is significant because touching may have different effects on older consumers than on younger ones. Consumer attitudes are often formed early in life and hospitality service has become more casual over time, so older consumers may prefer more formal server-customer interactions than do younger consumers. If so, then the positive effects of servers' touches may be limited to younger consumers.

Since servers may touch customers for more than a second or two and since they may touch customers of any age, it is important to understand both the effects of prolonged touches on customers and the effects of customer age on reactions to being touched. Knowledge about these effects would help servers decide who to touch and for how long. It would also help managers develop more appropriate policies and training programs concerning employee touching of customers. In the paragraphs that follow, we supply that knowledge by reporting our efforts to study these previously untested effects.

OUR STUDY

We tested the effects of touching customers for more than a second or two and the effects of touching both younger and older customers in this study reported below. An Asian American waiter at a Bennigans restaurant in Houston, Texas randomly assigns his customers to receive either no touch, a brief touch, or a prolonged touch. Our goal was to examine the effects of touches that were longer than those touches previously tested, but that were within the range of realistic server behaviors. Thus, the brief touch lasted approximately two seconds

(silently counted as “one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi”) while the prolonged touch lasted approximately four seconds (silently counted as “one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-Mississippi, four-Mississippi”). The waiter touched his customers on the shoulder while delivering the check at the end of the meal. He also recorded each subject’s bill size, tip amount, and touch condition, as well as his or her sex, race (white or non-white), and age category (young to middle age vs. middle to old age). More details about the study methodology are presented in Exhibit 1.

FINDINGS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

We found that customers tipped significantly more when touched than when not touched and that the duration of the touch had no effect on tipping. Percentage tips increased from an average of 11.5% in the no touch condition to an average of 14.9% and 14.7% in the brief touch and prolonged touch conditions respectively (see exhibit 2). The effect of touching customers in this study replicates similar findings from at least three previous studies. Together, these studies suggests that hospitality managers should encourage their employees to physically touch customers - doing so will increase satisfaction and employee tip income.

Our finding that even four second touches increase tips suggests that hospitality managers and employees need not fear that they might accidentally touch customers for too long. Obviously, touches would evoke negative reactions if prolonged enough. However, four seconds is not too long and it is extremely unlikely that a server would accidentally touch a customer for more than four seconds. Four seconds may not sound like a long time, but it seems much longer when touching a casual acquaintance or stranger. To get a sense of this, we encourage readers to try touching a friend while silently counting “One-Mississippi, Two-Mississippi, Three-Mississippi, Four-Mississippi.”

Since the duration of the touch had no effect on tipping, we collapsed the two touch conditions when assessing the generalizability of touch effects across the sex and age of the customer (see Exhibit 2). Our analysis indicated that touching increased the percentage tips of men and women equally. Touching increased men’s average tips from 10.0% to 14.0% and increased women’s average tips from 12.6% to 15.5%. This finding replicates the results of one earlier study (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984). However, two other studies have found that touching female customers increased tips more than did touching male customers (Hornik, 1993; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986). The two studies finding no differences in the effects of touching male and female customers had servers touch whoever requested or paid the bill. In contrast,

the two studies finding a difference in the effects of touching male and female customers studied only mixed sex dining parties and had servers randomly determine which sex to touch without regard to who paid the bill. This difference between the two sets of studies, along with their different results, suggests that men and women react equally positively to being personally touched, but that men react even more positively when their female companions are touched than when they are personally touched.

Although the impact on touch on tipping was not affected by the touched customers' sexes, it was affected by their ages. Younger customers responded more positively to being touched than did older customers. Touching increased the average tips of younger customers from 10.9% to 17.7%, but only increased the average tips of older customers from 11.9% to 13.7%. This finding suggests that hospitality workers should be particularly inclined and/or encouraged to touch younger customers. However, it does not mean that hospitality workers should take a "hands off" approach to older customers - touching did increase the tips of this group too.

The only other variable that significantly affected tipping in this study was the race of the customer. White customers left an average tip of 14.0% while non-white customers left an average tip of only 7.5%. Unfortunately there were not enough non-white customers to assess the generalizability of the touch affect on tipping across the race of the customer.

DISCUSSION OF COMMON OBJECTIONS

The hospitality educators and managers that we have talked to about touching customers often voice two objections to encouraging this behavior. First, these critics argue that they do not personally want to be touched by restaurant servers and that neither do other people they have asked. In other words, people's self-insights and self-reports are inconsistent with the experimental data on touch effects and the critics of touching give greater credence to the former than to the later. However, a substantial body of research in psychology indicates that people are often unable to accurately predict or explain their own attitudes and behaviors (see Myers, 1990, for a review of this research). Like the character in Dr. Suess's Green Eggs and Ham, people often assume that they will dislike things that, in fact, they would enjoy. The data suggest that being touched by hospitality workers is one of those things.

Second, critics argue that encouraging employees to touch customers opens a company to potential lawsuits from customers who object to being touched. Since it takes only one such customer to file a lawsuit, the critics contend that encouraging employees to touch customers is just too risky to be recommended. We did some legal research to evaluate the validity of this argument and found nothing to support it (see Exhibit 3). Briefly, encouraging employees to touch customers cannot open a company up to sexual harassment suits from customers, because the sexual harassment statutes apply only to employee-employer relationships. Requiring employees to touch their customers might provide the basis for a sexual harassment suit from employees, but even this risk can be avoided if managers make it clear that touching customers is only recommended and is not required. Of course, customers who objected to being touched could file a battery suit against a company that encouraged the unwanted touching. However, the damages in a battery suit depend on the harm done and the harm inflicted by a brief, casual touch is so small that damages would be next to nothing. Thus, there are no valid legal reasons not to encourage employee touching of customers.

EXHIBIT 1

METHOD

Source of Data

An Asian American waiter at a Bennigan's restaurant in Houston, Texas collected data about every third dining party assigned to his section (a smoking section) over a period of several weeks. The waiter worked both afternoon and evening shifts. Parties of eight or more were excluded from the study because gratuities were automatically added to their bills. In addition, data from fourteen patrons receiving discounts or complementary food items were excluded from analysis because their bill sizes were not comparable to those of other patrons. A total of 105 observations were obtained and analyzed.

Touch Manipulation

Every third dining party seated in the waiter's section was included in this study. The waiter served these dining parties using his normal routine until it was time for the bill. Before delivering the bill, he waited for a verbal or non-verbal signal that the party wanted its check. The person signaling for the check became the subject. If more than one person received a check at the table, they were treated as separate subjects. Once a subject was identified, the waiter randomly assigned him or her to a control or touch condition by tossing a coin. If a touch condition was indicated, a second coin toss was used to randomly assign the subject to either a brief or prolonged touch. In the control condition, the waiter delivered the check to the table without touching the subject in any way. In the brief touch condition, the waiter touched the subjects' shoulder for approximately 2 seconds (silently counted as "one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi") when placing the check on the table. In the prolonged touch condition, the waiter touched the subject for approximately 4 seconds (silently counted as "one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-Mississippi, four-Mississippi") when delivering the check.

Variables Recorded

The following information was recorded and analyzed.

(1) Touch: Whether the subject was assigned to the control condition (n=58), the brief touch condition (n=27), or the prolonged touch condition (n=20).

(2) Sex: Whether the subject was male (n=47) or female (n=58).

(3) Age: Whether the subject appeared to be young to middle age (n=36), or middle to old age (n=69).

(4) Ethnicity: Whether the subject was White (n=89) or non-White (n=16).

(5) Separate Checks: Whether the dining party received one check (n=85) or more than one check (n=20).

(6) Payment: Whether the subject paid with cash (n=89) or credit (n=16).

(7) Tip: The size of the tip left by the subject ($\bar{x}$ = 2.66, sd = 1.62).

(8) Bill: The size of the subject's bill ($\bar{x}$ = 21.28, sd = 12.36).

Identification and Treatment of Outliers

The dependent measure used in our analysis was tip amount as a percentage of the bill -- hereafter called "tip percentage" or "percent tip." A frequency distribution of this variable showed a large discontinuity after values of 26 percent -- there were four extreme values ranging from 38 to 61 percent. These four extreme values were over 2.5 standard deviations from the mean, so they were statistically significant outliers. In order to prevent these outliers from having a disproportionate effect on our analyses, we Winsorized them by assigning them a value of 26 percent. Since three of the four Winsorized observations came from touch conditions (one from the brief touch condition and two from the prolonged touch condition), this treatment of outliers made our tests of touch effects more conservative. This procedure also reduced problems with unequal variances in the experimental conditions. All of the analyses reported in Exhibit 2 were performed on the Winsorized data. [Note: Robust regression analysis performed on the original data produced essentially the same results.]

EXHIBIT 2

DETERMINANTS AND PREDICTORS OF PERCENTAGE TIPS

EFFECT	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION	SAMPLE SIZE	STATISTICAL TEST	PROBABILITY
TOUCH				F(2,102)=4.82	p<.01
No Touch	11.5%	.05	58		
Brief Touch	14.9%	.05	27		
Prolonged Touch	14.7%	.07	20		
SEX				t(103)=1.77	p<.08
Male	11.9%	.06	47		
Female	13.9%	.05	58		
AGE				t(103=0.50	p>.61
Younger	13.4%	.06	36		
Older	12.8%	.05	69		
RACE				t(103)=4.61	p<.0001
White	14.0%	.05	89		
Non-White	7.5%	.05	16		
SEPARATE CHECKS AT TABLE				t(103)=0.38	p>.70
Yes	13.4%	.06	20		
No	12.9%	.06	85		
PAYMENT METHOD				t(103)=0.06	p<.95
Cash	13.0%	.06	89		
Credit	12.9%	.04	16		
SEX X TOUCH INTERACTION				F(1,101)=0.28	p>.60
Male - No Touch	10.0%	.05	25		
Male - Touch	14.0%	.07	22		
Female - No Touch	12.6%	.05	33		
Female - Touch	15.5%	.05	25		
AGE X TOUCH INTERACTION				F(1,101)=4.87	p<.03
Younger - No Touch	10.9%	.06	23		
Younger - Touch	17.7%	.05	13		
Older - No Touch	11.9%	.05	35		
Older - Touch	13.7%	.06	34		