

# PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNEMPATHETIC CONSUMER BEHAVIOR OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

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## ABSTRACT

A number of service-oriented businesses, when asked, contend that they strive to treat consumers in an empathetic manner. In contrast to these responses, consumers surveyed and interviewed reported repeated service-oriented business experiences that they perceive as unethical. In analyzing the data obtained through an open-ended questionnaire, with 100 participants, in combination with extended individual interviews of 20 of those participants, ranging in age from 21 to 84 years of age, from a broad range of backgrounds, four general business service areas surfaced as the most severe repeat offenders of unempathetic behavior. This paper focuses on the responses of consumers who have had experience with a wide range of services and their reported experiences with what they perceived as repeated unempathetic behavior.

**Keywords:** Services marketing, consumer behavior, empathy

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A number of service-oriented businesses, when asked, contend that they strive to treat consumers in an empathetic manner. In contrast to these responses, consumers surveyed and interviewed reported repeated service-oriented business experiences that they perceived as *unempathetic*. In fact, there were four specific service areas that were perceived as particularly guilty of repeated unempathetic behavior. This research focuses on the responses of consumers who have had experience with a wide range of services. The purpose was to analyze the common service behaviors that create consumer feelings of a lack of empathy, mistrust and dissatisfaction, as well what effects these perceptions might have in developing and maintaining relationships with customers.

In analyzing the data obtained through an open-ended questionnaire, with 100 participants, in combination with extended individual interviews of 20 of those participants, ranging in age from 21 to 84 years of age, from a broad range of backgrounds, four general business service areas surfaced as the most severe repeat offenders of unempathetic behavior. These four service areas were auto repair services, health and dental services, health and auto insurance services, and telephone-related services. The most prevalent areas of complaint related to these four services were a deliberate lack of customer compassion, a deliberate desire to mistreat consumers, and a deliberate attempt to disrespect or take advantage of consumers. The resulting feelings were diminished trust, increased vulnerability, and powerlessness.

Normally, if consumers are unhappy and feel they have been treated unempathetically, they believe they have some power and control in seeking resolution for their unhappiness that might have an adverse effect on the business. One of the normal resolutions sought is to no longer do business with those individuals perceived as unfair. Since consumers interviewed about unempathetic behavior stated that

they felt they often did not have the option of no longer doing business, their normal freedom of choice was removed or limited—even if unhappy with the pricing. A second normal consequence for businesses treating consumers unempathetically is that consumers can spread negative information about that business. With the four services identified, consumers felt there would be little effect if they engaged in spreading negative information. This left consumers again feeling powerless because the services do not appear to care if they spread negative information.

To enhance perceived quality of service, some businesses are truly changing and legitimately thinking beyond the bottom line, as they recognize that customers are key stakeholders who help establish and maintain a firm's reputation. People are increasingly savvy consumers and they feel that they are buying not just a product or service anymore. So, organizations now need to provide a total service experience [TSE] for customers, which includes at least giving the perception that they are empathetic to their customers. Distilled research shows that people typically become customers for three major reasons: 1) convenience; 2) competency; 3) need. Once people become a customer, they stay loyal for three reasons as well: 1) service quality; 2) speed; 3) trust. From the customer's perspective, a service should deliver on all six. Even behavior like embracing demanding and pushy customers, is important because they will force service providers out of their comfort zone. This kind of customer feedback should be valued and is free until the service provider does not listen—then it gets very expensive in the form of lawsuits, poor word-of-mouth advertising, and adverse publicity.

An understanding on the part of businesses as to how evoking empathy affects repeat customers, may not always be clear. A key determinant of the perception of empathetic behavior, and in return, customer loyalty, is the consistent perception on the part of consumers that their expectations are being met. The relationship between a customer and a service business begins, and is maintained, because there are almost always mutual expectations built on trust, good faith, and fair dealing in their interactions. There is an implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing, and fairness in performance cannot simply be a matter of the service's own discretion. The implied covenant of a service's good faith and fair dealing is to enhance the contract or transaction in a manner consistent with the parties' reasonable expectations.

In understanding why consumers reported specific areas of a business as unempathetic, it may be key to understand that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has brought an increased focus on empathy or emotional intelligence, so consumers may have a heightened consciousness surrounding perceptions of this. In addition, the emergence of new forms of technology, industry-wide consolidation, and higher customer expectations has created a highly competitive market. The implications of this may be that it is increasingly important that new factors, such as the empathetic behavior of the service contact employees, be used as a means of differentiation to achieve higher growth. The empathetic behavior of these employees, then, can play a role in the formation of long-term customer relationships. If specific service-oriented businesses continue to devalue the importance of forming loyal customer relationships, the perceived empathy—or lack thereof—will continue to generate long-term liability problems.