



LEVERAGING THE POWER OF EMOTION TO IMPROVE SERVICE

By Bruce R. Hammond, Ph.D. and Todd Beck

The Constancy of Emotion

We assume the decision processes we use to choose everything from a restaurant to the clothes we wear are based on good evidence and reliable data. The real fact is obvious: even executives with MBAs and years of experience make emotional decisions day in and day out. It would be a tidier world if logic ruled—but it doesn't—or if all important decision-making were primarily computational—but, it is not. It is more often emotional.

We also pretend that being emotional is something that occurs occasionally, but that is probably more wishful thinking than anything else. We are emotional every waking moment. It is a matter of using the emotional activity in our minds to our advantage rather than the other way around. In short, we need to manage our emotions when we make day-to-day service choices.

One thing is certain. To be successful today, companies should understand the constancy and power of emotion in the decision-making process, and leverage that power to improve service to the customer. In

order to be successful, companies must also understand the factors that are intrinsic to customer service experiences.

Why Emotion Outweighs Logic in the Choices We Make

As a rule, people make daily choices from an emotional point of view. This suggests that service providers need to pay much more attention to how they promote and serve their customers.

Logic, we know, may be involved in large, expensive purchasing choices, but the situation is never truly balanced. That is, emotion always outweighs logic when customers make their choices, even the most important ones. We are all emotional beings who jump to conclusions, make wild assumptions, and make most of our decisions based on hope and feel – "I *hope* this works out." or "I really *feel* that this will be best for all concerned." It certainly may not be the best way to run our lives, but it is very natural.

Unfortunately, human beings like to believe that logic prevails in product and service choices. Many people refuse to believe that emotion plays such a powerful role in decision making, but researcher Shari Caudron put it succinctly when she wrote,



"Like it or not, emotions are an intrinsic part of our biological makeup, and every morning they march into the office with us and influence our behavior. On some level, we've always known that the ability to understand, monitor, manage and capitalize on our emotions can help us make better decisions, cope with setbacks and interact with others more effectively."¹

The Key Factors of Service Choice

Richard B. Chase and Sriram Dasu wrote an article about service that was published in the Harvard Business Review (June 2001) titled "Want to Perfect Your Company's Service? Use Behavioral Science." In it, they discuss the emotional side of service choices and responses.

Through the discussion, Chase and Dasu make a very strong case for including behavioral science in the customer service process.

Behavioral science offers a new way to look at the service experience.

The power of emotion can be leveraged to improve service using six key factors.

Success Factor One: *The Last Impression Defines the Service Experience and Determines New Choices*

It is commonly accepted that first impressions define an entire service experience. A dirty entrance to a restaurant is thought to shape the entire dining experience. This concept is central to most service improvement mantras. However, behavioral science takes exception to this truism.

In reality, customers remember the last thing that happens more than the first thing they experience. A flamboyant show of exuberance by a waiter may be momentarily impressive but an inaccurate, padded bill at the end of the dining experience will be remembered long after the event and flashy presentation are over. As Chase and Dasu put it, "Make no mistake, the frustrated customer remembers the messy final experience far more clearly than the jazzy, supposedly sticky home page of a web site experience."

Service providers would benefit from making sure the final moments of a service experience are positive. Accepting the fact that technology or a system will fail eventually; they have to train their employees to recover when things go wrong at the end of a service experience in order to leave a positive, final impression. Managers need to make sure that employees are flexible, especially when processes break down and the customer is aware that something has gone wrong.

I recently had lunch with a colleague of mine. Our food was excellent and the waiter was very attentive. But when he tried to pay the check, my colleague was told the line to verify credit card purchases was down. The obvious response from my colleague was, "So what? Do something!" The less-than-acceptable response was silence on the part of the bewildered server.

Service providers would also realize a competitive advantage if they have contingency plans for system failure, especially at the end of a service transaction. They would benefit from training employees to make the end of a service experience delightful and memorable.

The goal is always to leave the customer with a positive impression. When a problem does occur, apologizing for it and fixing the service breakdown are a customer's minimum expectations. Handling the situation exceptionally well, however, can create a strong, positive experience; strengthen the relationship; and increase loyalty.

¹Shari Caudron, "The Hard Case for Soft Skills," <http://www.workforceonline.com>
03/18/99

In cases of a service breakdown, service providers can leave a positive impression by, first, making an appropriate gesture of goodwill and making up for the mistake and the inconvenience it caused the customer. Second, service providers would benefit from keeping promises. When a service breakdown occurs, from the customer's point of view, a promise has already been broken. At this point, it is critical to do whatever else is promised to improve the situation.

Finally, service providers should follow up with the customer. This helps assure the customer the apology and actions are sincere and that the service provider is concerned about customer satisfaction. Follow-up also demonstrates commitment to the customer relationship.

Conventional wisdom says first impressions are the ones that count, yet behavioral science research tells us the real truth. Final impressions are more important. And even if an employee makes a mistake, he can recover to leave a lasting, positive impression.

Success Factor Two: Get Unpleasant Things Over as Quickly as Possible

When people know that they are going to have to face an unavoidable unpleasant experience as part of an otherwise desirable positive transaction, they want to get the bad experience out of the way as soon as possible. Therefore, it would be wise for service providers to engineer their service delivery processes in ways that acknowledge this fact.

Service providers must also ensure that the unpleasant part of the service experience is minor compared to the desired outcome.

The positive elements of service need to be measurably more intense than the negative elements.

In other words, the good must be overwhelmingly positive for the customer. He or she must believe, before the fact, that the positive part of the transaction is so desirable that putting up with a little discomfort at the beginning is acceptable.

The choice to go through an unpleasant experience to get to the fun part will be based on perceptions about how bad the negative part is and how rewarding the positive part is. For example, no dentist would tell a patient that he is going to go through excruciating pain to fill a tooth and make it whole again after removing decay. The wise dental assistant would reassure the patient even before the dentist appears that the procedure will be a little "uncomfortable" but well worth it when the toothache is gone. As much as anything, emotional choice is a matter of managing people's expectations and their subsequent choices.

One of the most common mistakes that service providers make is in not knowing how to present unwelcome information to customers correctly. The best way is to always present the reality to the customer. Customers want clear, accurate information, so successful service providers are clear about what the organization is unable or unwilling to do. That way, there is no confusion about what's possible. For example, *"All of our guest rooms are reserved on that date,"* or *"There is an additional cost for that coverage."*

Instead, less successful service providers, when describing the situation, sometimes use expressions or words that have the potential to alienate customers. Expressions such as *"I won't," "It's not my job,"* or *"It's against our policy"* tend to make people focus on the negative instead of a willingness to help. These words might create a barrier between an organization and the customer.



By presenting unwelcome information in a customer-focused way, providers can get unpleasant things over as quickly as possible, and ultimately, create positive customer experiences.

Success Factor Three: Make Sure the Claims Made About the Service Experience are Credible – and Carried Out

It is one thing to try to manage service delivery expectations. It is quite another to actually convince people that the pleasure after the pain is going to be worth it or that the pain will be much less than anticipated.

Credibility depends much more on direct experience than outside evidence. That is, perceptions of credibility depend on two fundamental things: personal experience and outside evidence. Personal experience is generally the more powerful of the two because it has already happened to the individual while outside evidence simply addresses possibilities. For example, if a dental patient has had a traumatizing experience getting a tooth filled by one dentist, the second dentist is going to have to be very convincing when he tells the patient it will only be a slightly "uncomfortable" experience. Logic and reasoning will not work very well in this situation. The patient has to feel that she can trust the dentist and has to feel that this will be a different, more pleasant experience. It is a matter of overcoming bad memories which research tells us are generally much worse than the actual unpleasant experience itself.

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Customers want to feel they're in capable hands and that promises will be kept. They want things to be right the first time. Should something go wrong, cus-

tomers expect a quick and thorough recovery.

In the example of the dentist and patient, the dentist will be unsuccessful using logic to overcome the emotional resistance brought on by the patient's past experience. Logic is wasted on those who are resisting emotionally. But if the dentist establishes trust and credibility, the patient feels the new experience will be different.

Success Factor Four: Merge the Pain and Divide the Pleasure

As Chase and Dasu remind us, experiences seem longer when they are divided or segmented. That is, the more parts of a service experience are broken up the more pain or pleasure we experience. What this says is that if we can combine all the painful parts of a service transaction into a compact, single time-frame, we can reduce the perceived significance of the pain. And if we divide the positive parts of service experiences up as much as possible, we can amplify the pleasure for the customer.

While it might be useful for service providers to do this when they can, in many situations, this is impractical. A typical service interaction is divided into many "defining moments"- when a customer judges the service provided and by extension the organization as a whole. In fact, there are so many it is often impossible to combine the pain. Let's examine a typical restaurant experience. You enter the door and you are told there will be a half-hour wait to get a table - *painful experience #1*. When you get to the table you are given a menu and you wait for the server to take your order - *painful experience #2*. After you order, you wait for your food - *painful experience #3*. When your food arrives, you eat and then you wait for the server to clear your table - *painful experience #4*. Your table is cleared and you wait for your check - *painful experience #5*. You receive your check and wait for the server to take your payment - *painful experience #6*. Even if the service is incredibly fast, the least favored service

moments – all that waiting time – cannot be combined. The same would be true for countless other sequential service transactions where the pain is distributed throughout the total experience.

However, several other things can be done when it is not possible to combine the pain.

The first one, managing the customer's expectations, has already been mentioned. The second is to make the pleasure so intense that, by comparison, the pain becomes a small annoyance.

As far as dividing the pleasure is concerned, that can and often is managed by service organizations. A common example is cited by Chase and Dasu. "Disney theme parks also understand both halves of the principle. They do a great job of distracting customers who are waiting in line, thus lessening their discomfort. And they make the rides really short as well.....which in turn creates the perception of a longer and richer day at the theme park. From the customer's point of view, two 90-second rides last longer than one three minute ride."²

Here again, though, segmenting the pleasure can cause problems in many situations. For example, suppose an engineer orders a new computer. He or she would want all of the parts to be delivered at the same time to allow the computer to be set up and used right away. Sending the various parts separately would cause frustration and actually reduce the pleasure.

The message here is clear. Combine the pain and divide the pleasure when it makes sense. But don't expect it to work every time.

Success Factor Five: *Include the Customer in the Choice and be Respectful*

Adults generally want to make their own choices. It is one of the rites of passage into adulthood. You are no longer told what to wear, what to eat, where to

spend your time. You can decide for yourself.

As everyone knows, you increase buy-in when you include people and allow them to help choose a solution or make a decision. In business, smart managers empower their employees, which in turn, build efficiencies and improve morale.

The perception of choice is what drives customer behavior.

In the same way, service providers who allow customers to make their own choices, or some degree of perceived choice, have happier, more committed customers.

But providing choice is more complex than it sounds. Before the service provider can offer choices, he must first provide respectful service during the interaction in order to determine what choices to offer.

Taking note of cues from the customer is the first step. This helps confirm the issues involved, and prevent further confusion and embarrassment. Second, because cues may indicate a range of issues, use respectful questions to help interpret the cues and better understand the issue involved. A customer's reluctance to fill out a form, for example, may point to a language issue, a sensory issue, or simply an unwillingness to share information. Asking respectful questions also gives the customer an opportunity to volunteer a preferred way to handle the issue.

Only after these first two processes are completed are service providers ready for the third step – considering options. Considering options gives them and their customers a chance to find solutions that work for everyone.

²Richard B. Chase and Sriram Dasu, "Want to Perfect Your Company's Service? Use Behavioral Science," (Harvard Business Review, June 2001, page 83)



But what if there are not a lot of options? What does the service provider do then? The key here is the *perception* of choice. For example, the choice of when to have surgery is often no real choice at all. It has to be done so the person scheduling the operation gives the patient a choice of dates, all within two weeks or so. As strange as it seems, this gives patients a feeling that they are controlling their own destiny when, in point of fact, they are really controlling very little. The perception of choice is emotionally satisfying even when logic would suggest the choice is non-existent.

Finally, after agreement is reached, service providers need to take appropriate action. Service providers should move forward quickly, while exercising tact by staying aware of customers' reactions.

Providing respectful service and including the customer in the choice is not always simple, but it is rewarding. Involving the customer in such a way leads to feelings of ownership, and feelings of ownership lead to commitment to a product or service.

Success Factor Six: Create Comfortable Behavior Patterns and Deliver Service Seamlessly.

Chase and Dasu suggest service providers create rituals for customers. They say that customers "find comfort, order, and meaning in repetitive, familiar activities."³ Of course, there is a great deal of research to support their claim. However, there is a bit more to it than they discuss in their HBR article.

First, the familiar pattern or ritual needs to: be meaningful and secondly, it must have a pleasurable consequence. It must lead to a memorable positive experience that the customer wants to repeat over and over again. No one would choose to repeat a pattern that causes pain if it was avoidable.

One of the most common ways companies can create comfortable behavior patterns is to satisfy customers' needs for seamless service. Seamless service

is the ability to manage service factors that are invisible to the customer. It's what goes on behind the scenes. Customers want to take advantage of the full range of services an organization offers, but they don't want to talk to numerous people or worry about service details. Customers expect service providers to coordinate events on their behalf. They want one person to be their guide to all services, their one point of contact. They want that person to present information in a way they understand and follow up by doing the legwork.

In general, there are six best practices that help companies deliver seamless service. These practices are: a) Remain focused on customer needs; b) Find out what other employees need to serve the customer; c) Be clear about what service providers need and expect from others to serve the customer; d) Share customer information and work tips; e) Follow through on commitments; and f) Thank others for their efforts on behalf of the customer.

These practices will help service providers work together better, build supportive internal relationships, and ultimately, foster a dynamic, collaborative work environment.

Comfortable behavior patterns or rituals may be more effective if they have an element of magic or mystery to them.⁴ Religious events are a perfect example. People go to a church, mosque, or temple week after week and repeat the same patterns of behavior over and over again. One could argue that they do it for...well...religious reasons. But there is apparently more to it than that. Religious services are pleasing, many behavioral psychologists say, because they fill our need for mystery and fantasy not unlike an Agatha Christie novel. We know that Poirot will identify the killer but its how he unearths the truth that fascinates the reader. So, even if the outcome is obvious and known beforehand, the excitement is in the mystical process.

³Chase and Dasu, page 84

⁴J. Krishnamurti, *The Network of Thought*, (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1982).

The most effective rituals have a magical or mystical quality.

Another prime example is going out to dinner at a favorite restaurant. At first, it would seem obvious that customers repeatedly go to a restaurant because of the food and/or service. However, there is credible evidence that a large part of dining out has to do with the mystery behind what happens when the customer orders and then receives food. We all know that the order goes to the chef, who cooks the food, arranges it on a plate, and gives it to the waiter, who delivers it. But what we feel is quite another thing. We order and our food magically appears after a period of time. And the more "magically" it happens, the more pleasing it is.

What Service Providers Can Do to Leverage The Power of Emotion

How do service providers move their environment to a higher level? By now, they can recognize the overwhelming power of emotion in making a decision is a key to successfully serving the customer. Even if emotion as a key to decision making is often overlooked by the decision maker, it should not be overlooked by service providers.

The need to address the six key success factors of service choice cannot be overemphasized. Understanding how customers make decisions and why they make them is the first step toward satisfying customers' emotional needs. It is this understanding that helps service providers manage each defining moment.

When service providers greet a customer, it's a defining moment. When asking a question, answering a question, offering options, trying to solve a problem, or recovering from a service breakdown – all can be

defining moments. Depending on how service providers handle each defining moment, the customer has a positive or negative experience. In short, their actions during each defining moment can either strengthen or weaken customer loyalty. When service providers strive to create positive defining moments, they help build loyalty.

How do service providers leverage the power of emotion? They evaluate what the organization is currently doing, look beyond the obvious to gain a fresh perspective (the customer's), and create positive defining moments by responding to the emotional needs of the customer.



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