

The Role of Empathy in Service Failure and Recovery

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Project Description:

“To err is human; to recover, divine” (Hart et al., 1990, p.156). Service failure is inevitable as interactions take place among service providers and customers. Many unexpected service failures occurred during the pandemic, such as cancellations of flights, unavailable hairdressing service, delays of healthcare service, and supply chain disruption in many sectors from manufacturing to education. The pain of service failure is widespread across consumer and business-to-business sectors. Along with service failure is the increase of customer anxiety, frustration and stress which pose many challenges for service providers to help customers and solve the problems (Dixon et al., 2020).

Service providers may recover service failures in two forms: psychological recovery such as empathising and apologising to show concern for customer needs, and tangible recovery such as providing compensation and value-added atonement (Miller et al., 2000). Much investigation has been conducted on service providers’ empathy towards customers, yet there is limited understanding on customers’ empathy towards firms (Wei et al., 2020), despite customers are found to be more forgiving when service failures are perceived to be out of service providers’ control (Choi and Mattila, 2008).

The importance of empathy is clear in both consumer and business-to-business contexts. For instance, empathy fosters good listening (Anaza et al., 2018) and facilitates communication between buyers and sellers (Limbu et al., 2016). Empathy includes willingness to customise services and having customers’ best interests at heart (Peterson et al., 2005). Empathy is beneficial for rapport building in business process (Limbu et al., 2016; Kaski et al., 2018) and would improve the wellbeing of people involved in the interactions (Bove, 2019). It positively relates to adapting perspectives and interactions to customer needs in different situations (Anaza et al., 2018) and is a key influencer to customer participation (Delpechitre et al., 2018).

In the digitalised world, human empathy is the heartbeat behind a world of big data and technology (Bieniek, 2019). An empathy-based marketing (Pederson, 2020) requests a deeper understanding of real-world empathy and virtual empathy (Carrier et al., 2015). Furthermore, despite empathy being often praised as “putting oneself into others’ shoes”, excessive empathy may be unhelpful and requires further investigation (Duan and Hill, 1996).

We encourage developing this topic with inter-disciplinary perspectives. We welcome a research proposal from B-to-B and B-to-C settings. The successful candidate will demonstrate a good understanding of related studies to their proposed research.

A qualitative research approach is encouraged to be employed in this project. However, we are open to proposals that incorporate other methods as appropriate to research questions and strengths of the candidate.

About the Supervisors:

Xia Zhu's main research areas are services marketing and business-to-business marketing. She is interested in researching service failure and recovery in both consumer and b-to-b contexts.

Matthew Higgins' main research areas are in marketing and consumer related issues around supply chains, education management, ethics, social marketing, social enterprises and not for profit organisations. He has also been known to dabble in representations of marketing in popular culture.

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