

The Influence of Emotional Labour Strategies on Customer Satisfaction and Word of Mouth Recommendations in Group Tours

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ABSTRACT

Service employees are required to create and maintain a positive emotional disposition during a service encounter to influence the customer's impressions and overall satisfaction. Different emotional labour strategies performed by employees will yield different effects because customers may perceive them as sincere, fake or robotic. This study aims to link the customer's perception of the emotional labour strategies performed by service employees and the potential outcomes of these strategies on the customers. A correlation analysis is used to identify the relationship between the strategies and the customer outcome whereas a multiple regression is used to identify which of the strategies has the strongest effect on the customer outcome. Overall, the findings offer strategic marketing implications for practitioners

Keywords: Emotional labour strategies, emotions, service employees, tour guides

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Any remaining errors or omissions rest solely with the author(s) of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

The service employees' emotion management during service encounters has received great interest from researchers in services marketing. The intangibility of services has elevated the importance of service employees in the service delivery process because they are considered as part of the services received by the customers. The nature of the travel and tourism industry involves rich human contact especially in group package tour. A group package tour is typically a high contact service whereby the tour guide has extensive interactions with the tour participants. The most unique feature of a group package tour is the presence of the tour guide who provides various services to the tourists in the group (Wang *et al.*, 2002). A tour guide is the service employee who represents the travel agency as well as the host country in delivering and maintaining the quality of service to the tourists in a group package tour.

Services offered by the tour guide are viewed as inseparable from the quality of the group package tour (Sharpe, 2005). Furthermore, they are the employees who significantly influence the customer's overall impression and satisfaction with the tour services. A service employee's performance during service interaction can make or break the service. Since service performance is very much influenced by the service employees' emotional displays, they are required to manage their emotions as well as express appropriate emotions during interaction with customers. However, employees have true feelings and emotions which can be affected by various events, people, surroundings and unforeseen happenings in real-time situations. Hence, it is not possible to expect them to be of similar emotions as required by the organization. To respond to the required emotional display, tour guides tend to cover up their true feelings and engage in acting to produce the required emotions. This emotional effort is termed as emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983).

Given that travel and tourism is a high contact service in which a tourist guide has intensive interactions with the tourists, and is required to display various appropriate positive emotions and play various roles, the tour guide of a group package tour is a typical occupation which demands emotional labour. The approaches used in emotional labour include surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000). Both acting approaches involves the service employees' effort to modify their emotional displays in order to meet, if not exceed, customer expectation of emotional expressions. There is an additional approach suggested as expressions of naturally felt emotions (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2005) to be included.

The tour guides' acting skills in service interactions can influence tourists' perceptions of overall service quality and satisfaction. When emotional leakage occurs, the tour guide is seen as insincere, inauthentic and unprofessional.

Customers who rated the service encounter with higher satisfaction ratings found that in a particular encounter, the service employees were friendlier and authentic (Grandey *et al.*, 2005). Customer judgment on services received is often influenced by the service employee's bodily gestures, voice tone and language. It should be realized that though service employees pay full effort to display emotions according to display rules, if the customers do not appreciate the positive emotions displayed, feel uncomfortable with it or perceive what the employee attempts to portray as inauthentic or insincere, then this indicates that the employee's acting has failed. This could jeopardize the overall customer service experience as well as the satisfaction of the customers if the organization and the employee do not pay adequate attention to the customer perceptions on emotional displays. As most of the emotional labour studies have focused on service employees as their subject of research, such as adventure guides (Sharpe, 2005), hotel service providers (Kim, 2008), customer service agents in call centres (Holman *et al.*, 2002), there is an urge to examine the concept of the emotional labour from the customer viewpoint. Although research has proved the expression of naturally felt emotion as another strategy (Brotheridge and Lee, 2003), additional empirical research is needed to strengthen the findings. Minimal research is conducted to understand the relationship between naturally felt emotions with customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations. Each of the three strategies can form different customer perceptions respectively. Some empirical evidence on determining whether the customers are able to detect a service employee's emotional portrayal is essential. Hence, it is imperative to gain insight into the relationship between the three different emotional labour strategies and customer outcome, specifically customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations.

The main objective of this study is to investigate the association of employee emotional labour strategies with customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations from a customer perspective. In addition, it also aims to explore which of the three emotional labour strategies has the strongest impact on customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Managing Emotions among Service Employees

Emotions are feelings, affects, moods and sentiments that people experience, interpret, reflect on, express and manage (Thoits, 1989). It is expressed physically via gestures, posture and facial features, and may result in specific actions to affirm or cope with the emotion (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999). The topic on managing an

employee's emotions is noteworthy because it explores the ways in which service employees and service organizations control and manage their display of emotions in the presence of customers. Bolton (2005) explained service employees employ emotion management to coordinate true feelings and require displays if a conflict occurs between the display rules and their inner feelings. Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labour has catapulted into the mainstream of services marketing. There is emerging recognition and awareness of the importance of managing employee emotions in marketing (Phillips *et al.*, 2006).

The interaction between service employees and customers is one of the key indicators for customers to evaluate the service quality (Meuter *et al.*, 2000), especially in highly relational services. A positive and delighted service experience leads customers to make inferences about quality and satisfaction. Yee *et al.* (2008) provided empirical evidence that employee emotions play a significant role in enhancing the service satisfaction of the customers. Godwyn (2006) posited that managing emotions could be used as a strategy to strengthen the service relationship between service employees and customers. Besides, another goal for displaying the appropriate emotional responses during a service encounter is to offer a pleasing customer service which is value added to a good core service offering (Grayson, 1998).

The various aspects of emotions underscore the notion that service employees' emotions are complex and challenging to be managed. They apply the concept of emotional labour in displaying the appropriate emotions during service.

Emotional Labour in Services

Emotional labour research has been carried out in various contexts, settings and occupations, which consist of the airline industry (Hochschild, 1983), cashiers (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990), banking and healthcare employees (Erickson and Wharton, 1997), call centres (Totterdell and Holman, 2003), hospitality (Chu and Murmann, 2006; Kim, 2008; Aziz and Samdin, 2010), tourism/tour guides (Van Dijk and Kirk-Brown, 2007; Wong and Wang, 2009), and bus drivers (Wu and Yuan, 2012). These researches have yield useful information about emotions in service work. Similarly, tour guides who play active roles in ensuring that tourists feel positive during the trip and are paid to manifest a specific emotional state within the tour are said to exert emotional labour in their job roles. Emotional labour occurs when an employee must purposefully alter his or her emotions in order to comply with an occupational or organizational demand. Indeed, emotional labour is the process of regulating feelings and expressions of emotions in order to achieve organizational goals (Grandey, 2000). The effort has an exchange value,

such as wages to compensate the service employees. There are three strategies identified in order to exert emotional labour (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2005). While most researches in emotional labour had treated the concept as two dimensional, i.e. surface acting and deep acting, the service employee's true feelings which are congruent with the display rules were not taken into consideration except in a few research works (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Diefendorff *et al.*, 2005). The argument for not including naturally felt emotions is that in order for emotional labour to be performed, the service employees must be experiencing or about to experience an emotional response which is incongruent with the display rules and that expression of naturally felt emotions does not fulfil the requirements. However, it has been argued that expressing naturally felt emotions should be included as one of the emotional labour strategies because although an individual may have the congruent feelings, they may still need to actively express the emotions to meet the display requirements (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993).

The first emotional labour strategy, which is surface acting, involves service employees only trying to manipulate their outward appearances (facial expressions, gestures, voice tone) in situations that demand an emotional display that is contrary to the felt emotions (Chu and Murmann, 2006). Surface acting implies temporarily suppressing or masking the felt emotions which are inappropriate for the job, and expressing the appropriate ones.

Next, deep acting involves service employees attempting to modify how they actually feel so that they can display appropriate emotions. Deep acting occurs when regulating the influences of the felt emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), suppressing felt emotions which are inappropriate for the job, and when employees are still feeling the felt emotions yet have to express the appropriate ones (Hochschild, 1993). Employees may use training or past experience to assist them to fit in the situation, or think about events that may conjure up the required emotions to facilitate the change of inner emotions in order to align with the organizational emotional display rules (Grandey, 2000).

The third emotional labour strategy included in this study is naturally felt emotions. Surface acting and deep acting are insufficient to represent the breadth of the emotional labour process at work (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Grandey *et al.*, 2003; Diefendorff *et al.*, 2005). Naturally felt emotions refer to the process of spontaneously experiencing and displaying felt emotions. Naturally felt emotions takes place when the service employee's actual emotions already mimic those expected from the job. Service employees are preferred and encouraged to engage in expression of positive naturally felt emotions, in order to enhance the authenticity of the service performance and customer satisfaction (Grandey *et al.*, 2005).

Customer Outcomes of Emotional Labour Strategies

Some studies in emotional labour suggested that emotional labour can influence service performance and customer evaluations on services (Grayson, 1998; Grandey *et al.*, 2005; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2006). Since this study attempts to examine the customer outcome of the emotional labour performed, customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth are chosen as the outcome because these are the ultimate goals of organizations in generating profit and to be sustainable in the industry. Wang *et al.* (2002) found that the performance of a tour guide significantly affects the customer's overall impression and satisfaction with the tour services.

Furthermore, Pugh (2001) indicated that the positive emotional displays of bank employees created a favourable customer outcome and otherwise. Studies also showed that employees who expressed positive emotions receive higher ratings on their performance from customers (Daus, 2001). Moreover, Liao and Chuang's (2004) study on restaurant employees also demonstrated that service employees' performance, including expressions of emotions during service encounters, has significantly contributed to customer satisfaction. Evidently, another study carried out in Singapore found that customers shape their service experience through the display of positive emotions by service employees, and then form their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service provider (Tan *et al.*, 2004). On the other hand, Wu and Yuan (2012) found that the customers' detection of a bus driver's emotional labour strategy does influence their satisfaction with the services. Specifically, Wong and Wang (2009) claimed that tour guides need to control their expressions of emotions and behave as closely as possible to customer expectations in order to satisfy customers during the tour. Their study also indicated that when tour leaders display appropriate emotions, it can improve the customers' perceptions of the services and enhance their willingness to recommend to others. Tourists' perception of emotional labour is related to their willingness to spread positive word-of-mouth (Van Dijk *et al.*, 2011).

When a tour guide engages in deep acting, it can be assumed that the tourists will perceive a more authentic expression of emotions from the tour guide. Supposedly, it will benefit the customer outcome (Van Dijk *et al.*, 2011). As confirmed in Wu and Yuan's (2012) survey research, customers can detect the difference between surface acting and deep acting by the service employees. These researchers highlighted that there is link between the customer detecting the types of emotional labour strategy and service satisfaction. Their findings indicated that customers have a higher level of satisfaction when they perceive the emotional labour strategy as deep acting rather than surface acting. Furthermore, deep acting is considered the preferred emotional labour strategy by tourists if the tour guide

attempts to develop perceptions of authenticity in relation to experiential services offered (Grandey *et al.*, 2005; Sharpe, 2005; Van Dijk and Kirk-Brown, 2007). Conversely, when tourists perceive that the tour guides engage in surface acting which seem feign, it is believed the act is detrimental to the customer outcome. Thus, it is assumed that the type of acting will impact the tourist's experience.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The relationship among the different emotional labour strategies explains how customer perception of service employees performing emotional labour may lead to various customer related consequences: increased or decreased level of customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations. Previous research have supported that the types of emotional displays impact the customer's experience of a service encounter (Pugh, 2001; Tsai, 2001; Tsai and Huang, 2002; Aziz and Samdin, 2010).

Grandey *et al.* (2005) pointed out that positive displays that are inauthentic may be sensed by customers and generate less favourable customer responses. Similarly, Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2006) proposed that customer perceived authenticity and the extent of the service employee's smile during the service transaction will influence their level of satisfaction. However, they failed to discover a significant relationship between these variables. Groth *et al.* (2009) and Aziz and Samdin (2010) found a negative relationship between surface acting and a customer's satisfaction with the service. When customers perceive that employees feign their emotions, their satisfaction towards the service encounter will decrease. Likewise, Van Dijk *et al.* (2011) suggested a negative association between visitor perceptions of a tour guide's surface acting and word-of-mouth recommendations because the visitors felt that the appropriate standards for emotional display were not met in the service interaction. Following the same line of reasoning, it is believed that surface acting has a negative impact on customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations because surface acting is perceived as spurious and deceptive by customers. Hence, this study formulates the following hypotheses:

H1a: There is a negative relationship between a customer's perceived employee surface acting and customer satisfaction.

H1b: There is a negative relationship between a customer's perceived employee surface acting and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Service employees who engage in deep acting are better liked by customers because they seemed authentic (Grandey *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, customers tend to rate a higher level of satisfaction for employees who are reported as being authentically positive (Grandey, 2003). Groth *et al.* (2009) contended that the customer who perceives the service provider to be engaged in deep acting is more satisfied. Next, Van Dijk *et al.* (2011) found that if visitors perceive the tour guide to be deep acting, it will positively impact word-of-mouth recommendations. Thus, this study predicts that:

H2a: There is a positive relationship between a customer's perceived employee deep acting and customer satisfaction.

H2b: There is a positive relationship between a customer's perceived employee deep acting and word-of-mouth recommendations.

In this study, the influence of naturally felt emotions towards customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations is predicted to be similar with the influence of deep acting. This approach is taken as both these strategies are prone to be viewed as authentic by customers. Service employees who are involved in deep acting or expressing naturally felt emotions tend to display expressions which are regulated inwards or genuinely felt. Aziz and Samdin (2010) proposed that the expression of naturally felt emotions has a positive relationship with customer satisfaction, as well as word-of-mouth recommendations. However, the result in their tested structural model showed that the relationships between these variables are not significant. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: There is a positive relationship between a customer's perceived employee's naturally felt emotions and customer satisfaction.

H3b: There is a positive relationship between a customer's perceived employee's naturally felt emotions and word-of-mouth recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

Empirical research using a survey was carried out to examine the proposed hypotheses. The survey instrument chosen for this study was a questionnaire due to the large numbers of tourists. Questionnaires were distributed to tour guides in

travel agencies, these tour guides in turn conveniently distributed them to tourists who were in their travel groups. Travel agencies involved in this study were gathered from the directory established by the Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia.

Analysis

The data was analysed using descriptive analyses, correlations and multiple regression analysis. A factor analysis was done to obtain each item's factor loadings and determine its construct validity.

The reliability and validity of these multi-item scales have been verified and applied considerably in prior researches. The questions were set in the format of a 5-point Likert scale, with the scale ranging from "1= Strongly disagree" to "5= Strongly agree".

Reliability test

Prior to running the main analyses, the questionnaire items were tested for its reliability. A reliability test using Cronbach's alpha was conducted in order to examine the internal dependability of the constructs. Results on the analysis showed that Cronbach's alpha of the constructs varied from .927 (naturally felt emotions) to .975 (deep acting, customer satisfaction) which suggest the reliability of the constructs used in this study.

FINDINGS

Respondents' Profile

In total, 279 usable questionnaires were analysed. Descriptive statistics showed that 52% of the respondents were female while male accounted for 48%. The majority of the respondents were from Asian countries (52.7%), followed by Australasia (11.5%) and Europe (8.2%). Furthermore, 8.6% of the respondents were from North America while 7.9% responded that they were from the Middle East. The remaining 11.1% of respondents were from other regions which include South America and Africa.

The latent relationships between the three emotional labour strategies (surface acting, deep acting and naturally felt emotions) toward customer outcome (customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations) were analysed using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. Cohen's (2000) suggestion in determining the strength of the relationship was used as a guideline. The summary of correlations among the constructs is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of correlations among constructs

N= 279	Surface acting	Deep acting	Naturally felt emotions	Customer satisfaction	Word-of-mouth recommendations
Surface acting	1				
Deep acting	-.474**	1			
Naturally felt emotions	-.682**	.140	1		
Customer satisfaction	-.394**	.648**	.260**	1	
Word-of-mouth recommendations	-.457**	.645**	.281**	.942**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

From Table 1, the correlation coefficient of .648 shows a positive as well as a strong relationship which indicates that when a customer perceives a tour guide is exhibiting deep acting emotions, the ratings for service satisfaction increase. It was also identified that deep acting had a strong and positive relationship with word-of mouth recommendations ($r=.645, p=0.00$) at a 0.01 level of significance. Nonetheless, surface acting was shown to have a negative with moderate relationship towards customer satisfaction ($r= -.394, p=.000$) and word-of-mouth recommendations ($r= -.457, p=.000$). Both negative relationships were significant at the 0.01 level of significance. This means that that there is a much smaller probability that the relationship occurred purely by chance. In contrast, naturally felt emotions showed a relatively weak and yet positive relationship with customer satisfaction ($r=.26, p=0.00$) and word-of-mouth recommendations ($r=.281, p=0.00$). Therefore, all of the hypotheses formulated earlier in this study are supported.

The relationship between customer satisfaction and all the three strategies is reported at $R^2= .441$. It implies that 44% of the variation in the dependent variable, customer satisfaction, can be accounted for by a variation in the three strategies. Research in social sciences often deal with abstract constructs to explain behaviours and personality traits, thus, this result can be considered a good result. This regression is significant at ($F= 103.496, p< .05$). The F-statistics ($F= 103.496$) was moderately large while the corresponding F-value was significant (.000) which is lower than .05. This reveals that the slope of the estimated linear regression model line in this study is not equal to zero.

At the same time, the relationship of word-of-mouth recommendations and the three emotional labour strategies is $R^2 = .429$. It indicates that 42.9% of the variation in word-of-mouth recommendations can be accounted for by a variation in the three strategies. This regression is significant at ($F=98.736$, $p < .05$). It was discovered that F-statistics ($F= 98.736$) was large and its F-value was highly significant at .000 which is lower than .05. This also indicates that the slope of the estimated linear regression model line is not equal to zero.

The findings show that deep acting has strongest prediction powers (beta coefficient = .670) in explaining customer satisfaction compared to surface acting and naturally felt emotions. This corresponds with the highest t-statistic or t-value of 15.427. The beta coefficient of deep acting suggests that as one standard deviation increases in deep acting, it will be followed by a .670 standard deviation increase in customer satisfaction. Surface acting has the smallest value of .121 amongst all.

While surface acting is not statistically significant in explaining word-of-mouth recommendations, deep acting and expression of naturally felt emotions on the other hand, are both statistically significant in predicting word-of-mouth variables.

From the analysis, deep acting has been identified as the variable with the largest beta value (beta coefficient = .582) in explaining word-of-mouth recommendations, compared to surface acting and naturally felt emotions. This corresponds with the highest t-value of 12.926. This entails that deep acting makes the strongest contribution in explaining word-of-mouth recommendations. The beta coefficient of deep acting explains that one standard deviation increase in deep acting is followed by a standard deviation increase of .582 in word-of-mouth recommendations. In contrast, surface acting has the smallest value of -.082 amongst all, indicating that it has the least contribution in explaining the model. The negative symbol indicates a negative linear relationship between surface acting and word-of-mouth recommendations. In short, the results of the multiple linear regressions suggest that deep acting is the dimension (strategy) that has the strongest influence on customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations.

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between the customers' perceived employee emotional labour strategies with customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendation. According to the empirical results, it demonstrates that surface acting is negatively associated with regards to customer satisfaction as well as word-of-mouth recommendation. This is due to the

fact that when customers are aware that the service employees are surface acting, they perceive that the service employees do not have the sincerity or willingness to perform the service. Consequently, customers might directly or indirectly limit their interactions with the service employee, which can affect their satisfaction towards the services. Customers may also be reluctant to spread any positive word-of-mouth after the service encounters.

With regards to the relationship between naturally felt emotions and customer outcome, it is weak but positive. This suggests that the emotions portrayed are in line with customer expectations. The difficulties for the customers in defining any emotional display by service employees as their naturally felt emotions are also understandable.

Apart from the above, deep acting has also shown positive associations with both customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations especially if they feel they are being treated sincerely. Customers inarguably are inclined to appreciate more the employees' efforts when they present authentic emotional displays. As a result, it will increase their level of satisfaction with the service being rendered and strengthen their intention to spread positive word-of-mouth to others.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

According to the findings and the discussions presented in this study, the importance and significance of emotions and emotional displays during service interactions can thus be examined appropriately and effectively. The understanding on how customers perceive and react to the employees' expressions of emotions during service interactions would provide new insights to managers on customer service strategy, hiring as well as training policies. The results of this study also verify that the three dimensions of emotional labour have significant influence on customer outcome. Tourists who perceive that tour guides are engaging in surface acting will exert negative effects on the customer outcome. Simply put, as long as tourists do not recognize the emotions displayed as surface acting, it will not yield any negative effect on the customer outcome. Managers should also address this issue by suggesting skills or training on ways to engage effectively in deep acting or portrayal of naturally felt emotions towards their customers, instead of surface acting which will be likely perceived as fake emotions by the customers, thus maximizing the probability of the customer perceiving it as deep acting.

Generally service employees, particularly in the hospitality field, are requested to cope with emotional labour issues without assistance or proper training programmes (Pizam, 2004). Managers can initiate a set of programmes inclusive of constructive ways in dealing with negative emotions when faced with

irate customers, such as the perspective-taking technique (Chu *et al.*, 2012). This technique would enable the employees to be in the customer's shoes and make them understand the customer's point of view.

The emotional element between the employee and the customer in a service relationship can be positioned as the point of differentiation to create customer delight in marketing the services other than the traditional marketing factors, which are price, product, promotion and place. Customer satisfaction towards a service can lead to customer-employee rapport and the customer's future loyalty intentions, which is the key driver to a service firm's long term success. Customer-employee rapport is the customer perception of having pleasant interactions with a service employee. The pleasant and enjoyable feeling during a service interaction can exert strong influence on a customer's repurchase intentions with the firm, and ultimately, loyalty intentions with the firm.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research comprises of a number of limitations which are able to suggest the directions for future research related to this study. First, the data was collected from tourists but the researchers did not include the data from the tour guides who executed these strategies. The tourists' perception might be different from the actual image that the tour guides intended to portray towards the tourists. Considering that this research only examined a single party's view, future researchers should try to investigate the view of the service employees. A comparison of the views of two parties in the service will allow researchers and managers to understand the magnitude of the differences in their perceptions, and perhaps the reasons these differences occur in the first place. Other than that, it would be more insightful if future researchers extend this study by combining information from the service employees' self-reported emotions with the emotional labour strategies, such as the employees' perceptions on their own emotional labour strategies, while at the same time cross-checking with their customers' responses on the proposed variables in their framework. Furthermore, the data of this research were gathered and collected from groups of package tours, which suggest that the findings need to be generalized with caution.

Second, the survey questionnaire developed in this study was written in English which restricted it to respondents who were able to comprehend English. Future researchers may consider translating the questions in the questionnaire into multiple languages in order to reach a broader group of respondents. Finally, given that the nature of this study, which is descriptive and quantitative, a survey questionnaire may not be sufficient to obtain information from tourists and to fully penetrate the

underlying feelings of the respondents. A combination of questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews or observations are highly recommended for future research to enhance the insights of the study.

In conclusion, through its empirical findings, this study has opened a path for future research on emotions and services marketing. At the same time, this research also offers a practical recommendation to service organizations on managing the emotions of service employees during service interactions.

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