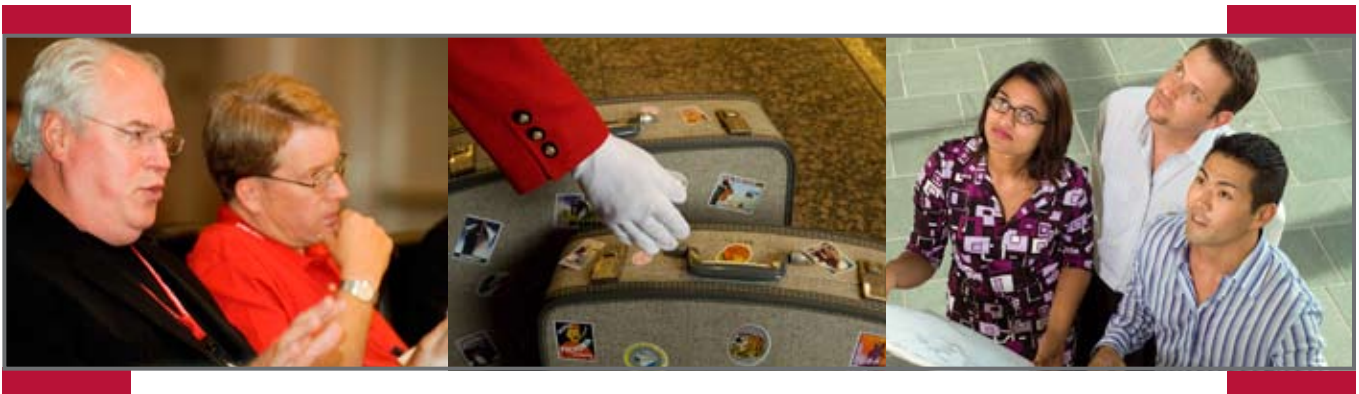


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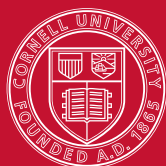


Service Scripting: A Customer's Perspective of Quality and Performance

Cornell Hospitality Report

Vol. 8, No. 20, December 2008

by Liana Victorino, Ph.D., Rohit Verma, Ph.D., and Don G. Wardell, Ph.D.,



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Cornell Hospitality Report,
Volume 8, No. 20 (December 2008)
Single copy price US\$50
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Center for Hospitality Research
Cornell University
School of Hotel Administration
537 Statler Hall
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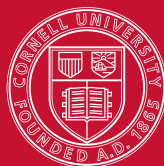
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many hospitality services are scripted, under the theory that scripts are an efficient method of ensuring a consistent level of service quality. However, few empirical studies have examined how the use of scripts affects the customer's view of service quality. Using videotape scenarios in an experimental setting, this study tests the effects that scripts have on perceptions of service quality in two types of hotel service interactions—namely, a standardized encounter (in this case, check-in) and a customized encounter (i.e., concierge service). As a starting point, this study found that customers are able to detect when scripts are in use in both kinds of interactions. Moreover, the study points out the value of taking customers' views into account when designing services. For the standardized interaction, respondents to this study reported no difference in their perceptions of service quality regardless of whether the scenario was highly scripted, moderately scripted, or relaxed (essentially, improvised). In contrast, for the concierge service, respondents perceived that a heavy use of scripting diminished service quality. At the same time, a moderate or relaxed approach to scripting for the customized concierge scenarios had no effect on respondents' perception of service quality. This study suggests that hotel managers should be circumspect in scripting customized encounters, but may apply scripts to standardized services without diminishing perceptions of service quality.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Liana Victorino, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of service operations management in the Faculty of Business at the University of Victoria (lianav@uvic.ca). She holds a Ph.D. from the David Eccles School of Business at the University of Utah. Her research interests include service design and innovation, as well as topics that connect operations management with marketing. Her current research on service scripts has been supported by grants from the Center for Hospitality Research and the Institute for Social Sciences at Cornell University. She has published in journals such as *Production and Operations Management*, *Journal of Product and Innovation Management*, and *Managing Service Quality*.

Rohit Verma, Ph.D., is associate professor of operations management at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration (rohit.verma@cornell.edu). He has published some 50 articles in prestigious business journals, such as *California Management Review*, *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, *Decision Sciences*, *Journal of Operations Management*, *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, *Journal of Service Research*, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, and *Production and Operations Management*. His research has been supported by numerous well-respected organizations around the world, such as Fairmont, Raffles, and Swissôtel (Singapore); Hammerson and NCR Knowledge Lab (UK); Citycon (Finland); Siemens and Fraport (Germany); Wiener Konzerthaus (Austria); and, in the United States, American Express, Calvin Klein, CSFB, eBay, First Chicago, General Growth Properties, HSMAI, Neiman Marcus, and the U.S. Forest Service.



Don G. Wardell, Ph.D., is professor of operations management and a David Eccles Scholar at the David Eccles School of Business at the University of Utah (mgtdgw@business.utah.edu). Chair of the department of operations and information systems and the department of management, he has taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, including teaching classes in Spanish at INCAE in Costa Rica. He was honored with the University's Distinguished Teaching Award as well as the DESB's Masters Teaching Excellence Award, the Brady Superior Teaching Award, and the Marvin J. Ashton Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. His research interests are mainly in the area of quality management, and especially statistical process control. He has published articles in such journals as *American Statistician*, *Decision Sciences*, *Journal of Innovative Education*, *Journal of Operations Management*, *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, *Management Science*, *Production and Operations Management*, *Quality Management Journal*, and *Technometrics*.

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Scripts are a commonly used tool to design and manage the encounter between front-line service employees and customers. Although the idea behind using scripts is to ensure a consistent level of service quality, anecdotal evidence suggests that customers are not always delighted when they detect a script in use. For example, a recent *Wall Street Journal* article described the use of scripting techniques in various services, such as rules for greeting a customer in a specified amount of time, and commented about the irritation some customers feel by their use.¹ The article discussed the disengagement between those who design the service encounter and those who are actually delivering the service. The article points out: "...when interactions become scripted and codified, the opportunity to make a true connection—the goal of all these activities—is lost."²

¹ Amy Merrick, "Good Service Gone Bad: What Makes One Consumer Happy May Annoy Another; It's Easy for Companies to Cross That Fine Line," *Wall Street Journal* (Leadership Special Report), Vol. 248, No. 102 (October 30, 2006), p. R4.

² *Ibid.*

A prime reason for using service scripts is to ensure a consistent level of service quality, but we know of few empirical studies that have actually examined the effect of scripts on guests' perceptions of service quality. In this report, we seek to fill that gap by providing an empirical examination of the effect scripting has on customers' assessment of service quality for two types of hotel service encounters, standardized (check-in) and customized (concierge).

Service Scripts

A service script, as defined in this study, is a detailed guide for front-line employees to follow during a service encounter. A script includes a predetermined set of specific words, phrases, and gestures, as well as other expectations for the employee to use during each step of the service process. Anecdotal examples of items that may be included in scripts are guidelines for how to greet customers, timing rules, and specifications for discussing store promotions (i.e., cross-selling).

Scripting provides the details of employees' jobs, defines what they do, and specifies how the tasks will be completed and what outcome should occur.³ Tansik and Smith suggest that scripts are "... a job design tool that enables management to exert a degree of control over employee-customer interactions that may take place where there is no direct supervision or oversight."⁴ The idea is that if the script is fol-

lowed appropriately, managers can have a level of assurance about the service being delivered by their employees.⁵

Scripts can vary in level of intensity and complexity, and organizations' uses of scripts may vary according to the number of scripts used, percentage of time employees spend in scripted activities, or percentage of scripted tasks.⁶ In this report we are interested in script intensity, or how strictly an interaction is scripted. At one end of the spectrum is low intensity scripting, which does not rely on scripts and allows for improvisation by the employee. At the other end is high intensity scripting, which requires the employee to follow the script relatively close to the letter.⁷

In this study, we examine the effects of script intensity at three distinct levels. One level is the extreme case of a highly scripted encounter, where employees are instructed to follow a verbatim script throughout the entire service encounter. On the other extreme is the relaxed script, which is more subtle and allows considerable latitude in the encounter. In the midst of the continuum is a moderately scripted encounter that allows for some departure from the encounter's script. Our video experiment examines these three points of the scripting continuum. We do this to determine whether customers are able to detect these script intensity levels, and, if so, what effect it has on their perceptions of service quality.

³ D.A. Tansik and W.L. Smith, "Dimensions of Job Scripting in Services Organisations," *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1991), pp. 35–49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

Service Encounter Type

For this study we applied Lynn Shostack's definition of a service encounter: "[the] period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service."⁸ We examine the use of scripts for particular types of service encounters, and we suspect that not all hotel service encounters are amenable to the use of heavy scripting. For this reason we wanted to test two service-encounter types. To classify service encounters into particular types, we build from research that categorizes services by standardization or customization level of the service's specific aspects or steps to the process.⁹ For example, a hotel service experience comprises a sequence of processes which make up one customer's hotel stay. Each of these processes has its own characteristics, including the extent to which the service can be standardized or customized.

A standardized process is one that is routine, whereas a customized process is one that is tailored to each individual's needs.¹⁰ For example, as examined in this study, check-in is typically a standardized service process, while a more customized process would be concierge services. A few other service process examples from various service types that are typically considered to be standardized are bank deposits and withdrawals, store greetings and most register transactions at retail stores, and being seated at a table-service restaurant. On the other hand, customized service process examples might include setting up a new bank account, customer service or assistance at retail stores, and dining at a table-service restaurant. We tested three levels of scripting for a standardized hotel check-in and a customized concierge service encounter to determine whether the level of scripting affects a customer's perception of service quality in both of those instances.

⁸ L. Shostack, "Planning the Service Encounter," in *The Service Encounter*, ed. J.A. Czepiel, M.R. Solomon, and C.F. Suprenant (New York: NYU Institute of Retail Management, 1985), p. 243.

⁹ J.B. Dilworth, *Production and Operations Management*, 3rd edition (New York: Random House, 1986); and L. Shostack, "Service Positioning through Structural Change," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 51 (1987), pp. 34–43.

¹⁰ Shostack (1987), *op.cit.*

Customers' view. Before describing our study, we must point out that our focus on customers' perceptions of the experience is intentional. As Chase and Dasu stated: "Ultimately, only one thing matters in a service encounter—the customer's perceptions of what occurred. Executives who design and oversee service encounters need to focus far more of their attention on the underlying factors affecting those perceptions."¹¹ Therefore, this study considers the customer's view of the effect scripts have on service quality.

Research Questions

Since the service encounter involves human interactions, behavioral theories such as script theory can be applied to enhance service encounter design.¹² We base our research framework on script theory, where a script is defined as "...a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a participant or as an observer."¹³ Script theory has been applied to the service encounter in numerous marketing studies.¹⁴ Building from this stream

¹¹ R.B. Chase and S. Dasu, "Want to Perfect Your Company's Service? Use Behavioral Science," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2001, p. 84.

¹² J.A. Czepiel, M.R. Solomon, C.F. Suprenant, and E.G. Gutman, "Service Encounters: An Overview," in *The Service Encounter*, ed. J.A. Czepiel, M.R. Solomon, and C.F. Suprenant (New York: NYU Institute of Retail Management, 1985), pp. 3–15.

¹³ R.F. Abelson, "Script Processing in Attitude Formation and Decision Making," in *Cognition and Social Behavior*, ed. J.S. Carroll and J.W. Payne (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1976), p. 33; and R.F. Abelson, "Psychological Status of the Script Concept," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 36 (1981), pp. 715–729.

¹⁴ See, for example: R.A. Smith and M. J. Houston, "Script-based Evaluations of Satisfaction with Services," in *Emerging Perspectives in Service Marketing*, ed. Leonard L. Berry, G. Lynn Shostack, and Gregory D. Upham (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1983), pp. 504–508; Czepiel *et al.*, *op.cit.*; J.R. McCallum and W. Harrison, "Interdependence in the Service Encounter," in *The Service Encounter*, ed. Czepiel *et al.* (New York: NYU Institute of Retail Management, 1985), pp. 35–48; J.E.G. Bateson, "Perceived Control and the Service Encounter," in *The Service Encounter*, ed. Czepiel *et al.* (New York: Institute of Retail Management, 1985), pp. 67–82; M.R. Solomon, C.F. Suprenant, J.A. Czepiel, and E.G. Gutman, "A Role Theory Perspective on Dyadic Interactions: The Service Encounter," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 49 (1985), pp. 99–111; and M. Bitner, B.H. Booms, and L.A. Mohr, "Critical Service Encounters: The Employee's Viewpoint," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58 (1994), pp. 95–106

Our findings suggest that customers take a dim view of heavy scripting in customized service interactions.

of research, we propose that a customer approaches a hotel with a set of expectations about its services. When a particular service encounter is known to be standardized, the customer would expect the process to be straightforward. If the process is customized, on the other hand, the customer will expect more flexibility and a greater adaptation to specific customer needs. Hence, we propose that different types of service engender different customer expectations for how the service should be delivered. Guests inevitably apply these expectations as a comparison standard when they evaluate service performance.¹⁵ Because those expectations include a gauge of how flexible the service must be, we assert that different levels of script intensity will affect customers' perceptions of service quality. We specifically aim to address the following research questions.

RQ1: What effect does scripting have on customers' perceptions and assessment of service quality?, and

RQ2: Are there particular service process types which are better suited for different scripting levels?

Experimental Design

To address these research questions, we designed a video experiment which depicted hotel service encounter scenarios. Respondents were asked to watch one video clip and then to answer a series of questions related to their perception of the service quality depicted. Because we were testing two types of service and three levels of scripting, the video experiment was a 2 x 3 between-groups design. The independent variables were the service script level and service encounter type. Script level was predominantly scripted, moderately scripted, or relaxed. The service encounter type was either standardized or customized. The dependent variable was the customer's perception of service quality.

The service scenarios used in the video experiment were designed by the research team, except for the relaxed case, which was improvised by the actress. Here's how we developed the service scenarios. First we determined the

basic service process steps for the standardized and customized encounters. Each encounter began with a greeting, continued with performance of the service, and concluded with a closing to the interaction. The next phase involved the development of script rules. To increase the realism of the encounter, we asked managers and employees of various services for examples of scripts and also collected anecdotal cases of scripting, which we used to design our script rules.

For purposes of increasing the internal validity of the study, a number of possible variables were kept consistent, such as the content provided by the employee and the customer's role in the interaction. In addition, the customer's face was never shown in the video to deter the possibility that facial expressions might affect respondents' perception of service quality.

In the next phase, the script drafts were edited several times. For example, scripts were read aloud to create a script that is representative of an actual hotel transaction. Once the scripts were finalized, we conducted a series of rigorous pilot studies after which we rewrote the drafts. The amended drafts were again pilot tested to ascertain respondents' perceptions of scripting level. The statistical results from the second pilot study supported that participants were able to detect the use or lack of use of a script for both types of encounters.

With the service encounter scenario drafts completed, the videos were recorded by a professional film crew. Two professional actors who had industrial acting experience were hired to act as employee and customer. A hotel graciously permitted us to record the service encounter videos at its front desk and lobby during off-peak hours.

The experimental video clips were then distributed through an online questionnaire. We engaged a well respected market research company to collect a representative national sample. Links to the online survey were sent to prospective respondents across the United States. The 498 who responded were randomly assigned to watch one of the service vignettes. They were then asked to rate the service

¹⁵ Smith and Houston, *op.cit.*; and McCallum & Harrison, *op.cit.*

EXHIBIT 1

Demographic and traveling characteristics of national sample

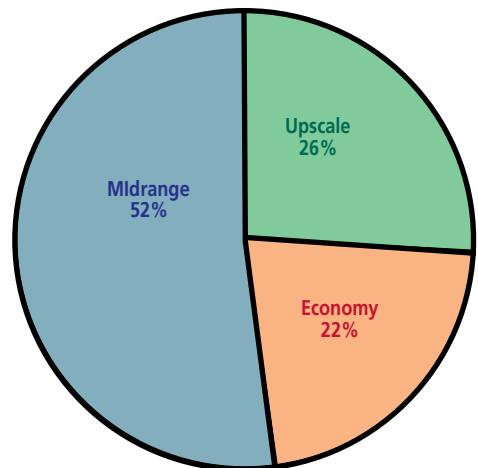
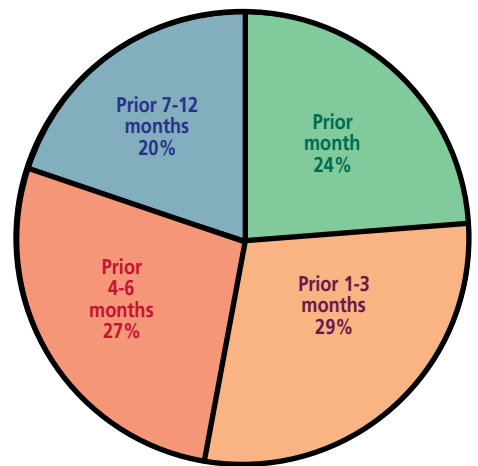
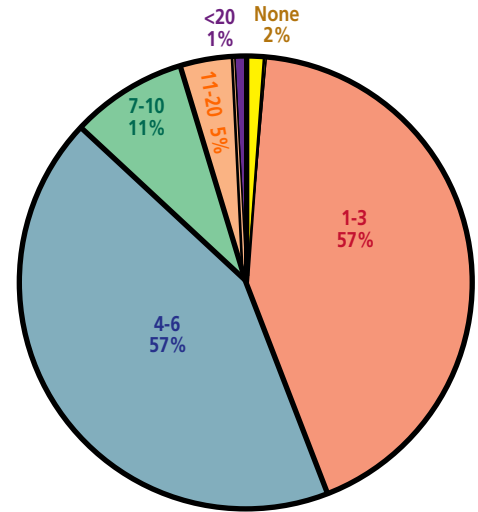
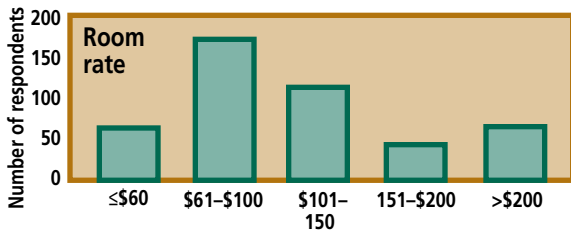
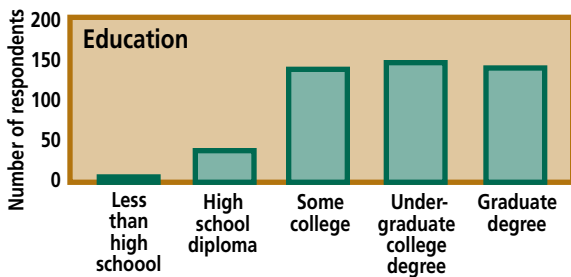
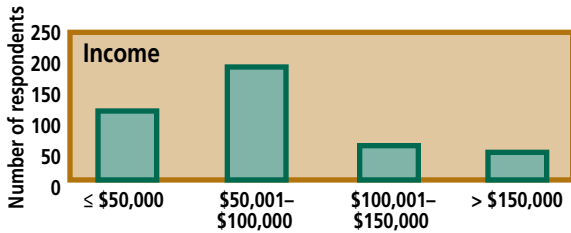
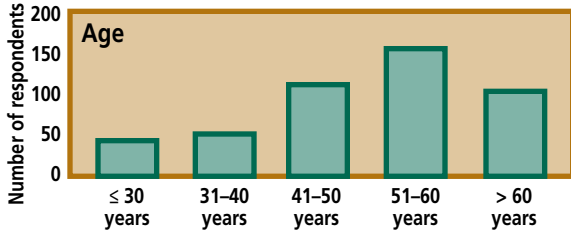
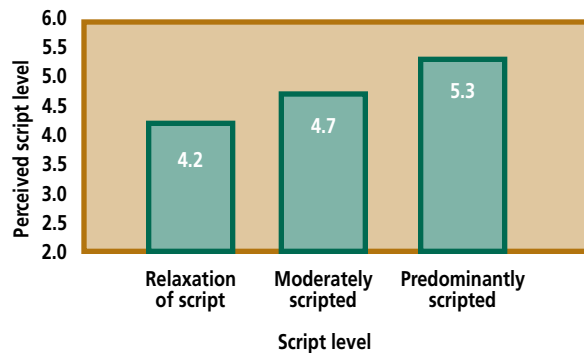
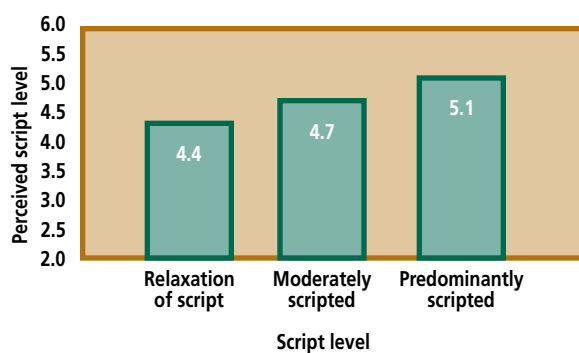


EXHIBIT 2**Perceived script-level estimates for standardized manipulation check****EXHIBIT 3****Perceived script level estimates for customized manipulation check**

quality for the encounter they just witnessed using the SERVPERF inventory.¹⁶

Survey Design

The online questionnaire included four sections, as follows: (1) respondents' experience as a hotel guest, (2) the video experiment itself, (3) the manipulation test, and (4) demographic questions. The first section began with a screening question which removed any respondent who had not stayed in a hotel within the prior year. This helped to ensure that each respondent was familiar with current hotel service offerings. For respondents who passed the initial screening question, the survey followed with questions about their frequency of travel, the type of hotel they typically patronize, their reasons for travel, and other hotel-related questions. Respondents then watched one of the experimental video clips and provided their perception of the interaction they had just watched. Next, a series of questions related to the manipulation check were administered to ensure that customers were able to perceive the three script levels. The questionnaire concluded with demographic questions.

Sample Characteristics

The following demographic and traveling characteristics were represented in the dataset (see Exhibit 1). Sixty-seven percent of the respondents were female. Twenty percent of the respondents were under the age of forty, while the ma-

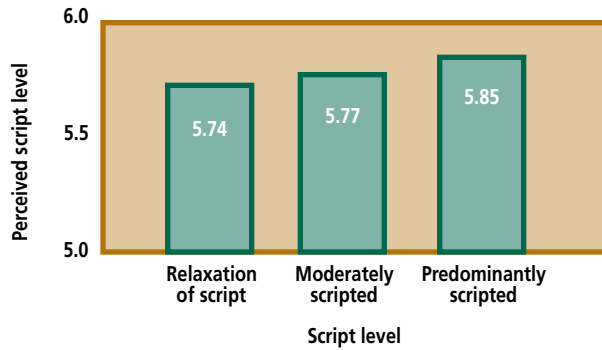
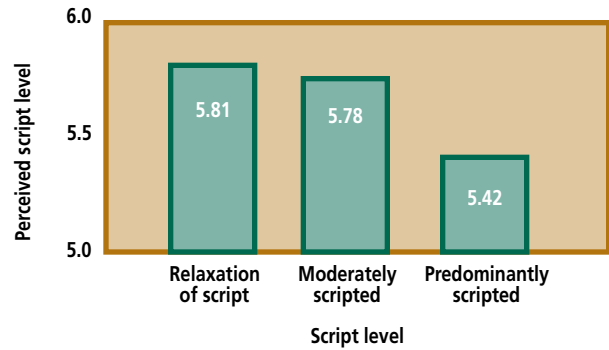
jority of the respondents were over the age of fifty. Almost all of the respondents had at least some college education, and the sample spanned a wide distribution of income levels.

The sample comprised both frequent travelers and those who had not traveled often in the previous year. The majority of the respondents had traveled on one to three trips in the prior year, and a few had traveled on more than seven trips in the previous year. The range for most respondents' recent room rate was \$80 to \$150 a night. Fifty-two percent of the respondents stayed in a mid-range hotel during their last hotel stay, while 22 percent had stayed in an economy hotel and 26 percent in an upscale hotel. Respondents most commonly stayed in standard hotel rooms. The majority of the respondents were traveling for leisure purposes, with 22 percent traveling on business.

Manipulation Check

To ensure that we had in fact created three discrete script types, we asked a series of questions related to respondents' perception of the scripting level of the scenario they viewed. From these questions, we calculated a composite score to estimate each scenario script's manipulation level. We found that respondents were able to detect the script's manipulation level for both standardized and customized encounters. With regard to the standard scenarios, they gave a mean estimate of perceived scripting level of 4.22 for the relaxed scenario, 4.74 for the moderately scripted scenario, and 5.28 for the predominantly scripted scenario. As shown in Exhibit 2, the means were all in the appropriate direction, with respondents' perception of scripting level increasing along with our design. The main effect for the manipulation of standardized encounters was significant, ($F(2, 231) = 13.459, p < .001$). In addition, all pairwise

¹⁶ The SERVPERF scale is a 22-item scale to determine service quality. See: J.J. Cronin and S.A. Taylor, "Measuring Service Quality: A Reexamination and Extension," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 56 (1992), pp. 55-68. The scale consists of the performance and perception items of SERVQUAL. See: A. Parasuraman, V.A. Zeithaml, and L.L. Berry, "SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (1988), pp. 12-40.

EXHIBIT 4**Mean assessment of service quality for standardized (check-in) encounters****EXHIBIT 5****Mean assessment of service quality for customized (concierge) encounters**

comparisons were significantly different from one another at the .05 level.

Similar to the standardized case, the mean estimates of the customized encounters also were in the appropriate ascending direction. Exhibit 3 (previous page) graphically depicts the resulting mean estimates. The main effect for the customized encounters' manipulation was significant ($F(2, 219) = 5.379, p < .01$). In addition, all pairwise comparisons were significant with the exception of partial significance for the relaxed and moderately scripted cases. Thus, we found support that the design represented three distinct levels of scripting for both the standardized and customized cases.

Video Experiment

With evidence that respondents could determine the differences between the scenarios' scripting levels, we analyzed the results of the video experiment. Respondents were randomly assigned to watch one of the service scenarios and then were asked questions pertaining to their perception of service quality. We deleted responses from those who did not answer any of the twenty-two service quality items, but we kept respondents who selected "I don't know" for one or more of the twenty-two items. Rather than treat these responses as missing we substituted the mean of all other respondents' scores for that item. This screening process left us with 465 respondents assigned to six cells.

Scripting a Hotel Check-in

When examining the standardized check-in encounters, we found that respondents perceived a somewhat higher service

quality for the predominantly scripted approach as compared to the relaxed script approach, but the differences were not statistically significant ($F(2, 237) = .342, p > .05$, see Exhibit 4). Thus we did not find support for an association between script level and the perception of service quality for standardized encounters, and all pairwise comparisons were not significant. Although the results from the manipulation check suggested that customers were able to detect that the employee was using a script in the standardized encounter, we found that this did not have an effect on their perception of service quality.

Scripting at the Concierge Desk

While detection of a script had little effect on respondents' view of a hotel check-in, we found quite a different result for the concierge interaction. In short, we found that these respondents were not receptive to the predominant use of scripting in such situations, but this reaction occurred only with the heavily scripted scenario (as shown in Exhibit 5). In contrast, customers did not discriminate between the moderately scripted encounter and the relaxed approach for this customized service. Stated in relation to our research questions, the pairwise comparison analysis supported that there was no significant difference between a relaxed and a moderately scripted approach in regards to perceived service quality for customized services. However, customers did perceive a predominantly scripted customized encounter to be of lower service quality than the other, less scripted levels. Overall, the main effect of perceived service quality for customized encounters was significant ($F(2, 222) = 3.546, p < .05$).

To Script or Not to Script? Lessons Learned from Customers

Our findings suggest that customers take a dim view of heavily scripting employees in customized service interactions. While respondents' perception of service quality was not affected by the predominant use of scripts in a standardized encounter like guest check-in, a different outcome was found for customized encounters. In particular, customers perceived service quality for a customized process like concierge service more negatively when the employee was heavily scripted. Put another way, for customized service encounters, a relaxed form or moderate use of scripting resulted in perceptions of a higher service quality level than did a predominantly scripted encounter. However, we found no difference in customers' perceptions of service quality between moderate and relaxed cases of scripting for customized encounters. Our findings further suggest that managers of concierges could, for instance, make use of moderate scripting without diminishing perceptions of service quality, especially if the concierge is allowed to depart from the script as needed. This moderate form of scripting would involve the empowerment and training of employees regarding when to deviate from the script and would discourage evaluating employees solely on the extent to which they follow a script. By moderately scripting customized encounters, managers would have the opportunity to reap the benefits associated with scripting, such as gaining the assurance of a reasonably consistent approach to service, without the detrimental cost of a negative experience for the customer. At the same time, we found evidence that hotels could script guest check-ins and other standard service processes to ensure consistent service without interfering with guests' assessment of the service's quality. However, this conclusion is based on only this study, and further research should be conducted.

Script sensitivity. In closing, we would like to underscore the finding that customers easily recognize when scripts are being applied to a service interaction. Although this is not always detrimental to how they view the quality of that service, the detection of a script for customized services can diminish guests' view of those services' quality. We hope that service managers will take these findings into account as they weigh the use of scripts. By taking customers' views of scripts into consideration service managers can appropriately match the script level to the service encounter type. This approach should result in an increased likelihood of customers perceiving a high quality experience. ■

An invitation to the hospitality and service industry

The results presented in this report are first of a new series of research studies we are conducting on the role of service scripts. If you are interested in participating in our future and ongoing mutually beneficial research then please contact Professor Rohit Verma, at rohit.verma@cornell.edu.

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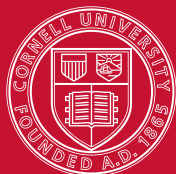
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