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Service Scripting and Authenticity: Insights for the Hospitality Industry

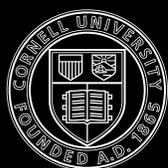
Cornell Hospitality Report

Vol. 12 No.13, October 2012

by Liana Victorino, Ph.D., Alexander Bolinger, Ph.D.
and Rohit Verma, Ph.D.

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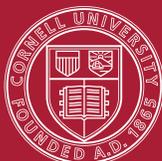
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Service Scripting and Authenticity:

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by Liana Victorino, Alexander R. Bolinger, and Rohit Verma

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Customers in hotels and restaurants can quickly discern when an employee is following a service script. The customer’s reaction to that script depends in part on the nature of the service transaction, but also on how authentically the employee behaves within the script. A study of 2,407 U.S. hospitality customers found that many customers (almost half of the sample) focus on the treatment aspect of scripts—that is, how they are treated by the employee—and have a generally negative view of scripted services. However, about one-third of the sample considered the task-completion aspect of scripts. These respondents agreed that scripts are valuable for ensuring that all aspects of a task are completed correctly. Certain encounters are well suited to strict scripting (such as reservations and check-in), because their task-related aspects are critical to quality. Other encounters, such as concierge service and fine-dining interactions, might benefit from more flexible scripts, since customers are more focused on how they are treated during such service interactions. The respondents were uniformly negative when they detect what is known as “surface acting,” which occurs when employees are clearly just going through the motions of a script. In contrast, positive results occurred with “deep acting,” in which employees are (or seem to be) sincere in their service interaction. However, only a substantial minority of respondents reported perceiving sincere script delivery by employees. Given the importance of scripts in ensuring that service tasks are completed correctly, the study’s implications for hospitality managers include strategies of assessing the balance between task and treatment, determining which tasks are appropriate for flexible scripts, training employees in “deep acting,” and gaining employees’ buy-in by having them assist with script design.

Service Scripting and Authenticity:

Insights for the Hospitality Industry

by Liana Victorino, Alexander R. Bolinger, and Rohit Verma

Most hospitality firms have created scripts to manage the service interactions of their frontline employees.¹ The level of detail contained within a script and the expectation that the employee will follow the script to the letter, however, can vary by interaction and by company.² Stricter forms of scripts specify the exact words and phrases employees should use when speaking with customers (e.g., formally greet all customers with, “Good Afternoon” rather than “Hi”) and may include behavioral rules (e.g., make eye contact or use a pleasant sounding tone of voice when speaking to customers). Such tightly scripted encounters would require employees to strictly abide by the script, and their performance would be evaluated based on how well they follow the script. In contrast, more relaxed approaches to scripting give employees discretion in how they deliver service and operationalize the script with customers. Such scripts may still note the typical service encounter sequence and may even include suggested language and behavioral rules. However, improvisation would be allowed during the encounter, and the employee might deviate from the script when they feel it is necessary. In this instance, performance would likely be evaluated by the outcome rather than how well the script was followed.

¹ Robin Leidner, *Fast food, fast talk: Service work and the routinization of everyday life* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1993); and David A. Tansik and William L. Smith. Dimensions of job scripting in services organizations. *International Journal of Service Industry Management* 2(1) 1991: 35-49

² Liana Victorino, Rohit Verma, Bryan L. Bonner, and Don G. Wardell. Can customers detect script usage in service encounters?: An experimental video analysis. *Journal of Service Research*. In press (pre-published May 25, 2012, doi:10.1177/1094670512446062).

Hospitality managers must decide what level of scripting will provide the highest quality experience for customers for every potential service encounter (e.g., reservations, check-in, room service, concierge services). In making these decisions, it is important to remember that customers are able to distinguish different forms of scripting and recognize the subtle differences in service design techniques.³ Recent research by Victorino, Verma, and Wardell has shown that varying the use and level of scripts (i.e., predominantly scripted, moderately scripted, and relaxed scripting) in particular hospitality service encounters affects customer perceptions of quality, depending on the transaction.⁴ For example, at hotel check-in, customers' perceptions of quality were unaffected by the different degrees of scripting. Regardless of whether employees were required to strictly adhere to the script or were allowed to take a more relaxed approach, customer views of check-in quality were unchanged. In contrast, when a highly scripted approach was used at the concierge desk, customers reacted negatively to the use of scripts. Given this negative reaction to inappropriate script use, hospitality managers should carefully consider when to apply scripting and how to properly match the script level to the service encounter. To continue this line of study, we completed an exploratory analysis to understand further the impact scripting has on customer perceptions of service. The key managerial findings and insights drawn from that study are summarized within this report.⁵

Service Implications of Scripted Interactions

Scripting is an intriguing service design tool because of the control that scripts provide hospitality managers over both the task and treatment elements of the encounter.⁶ From a task perspective, a script outlines the process steps to be fol-

lowed by employees.⁷ Check-in is a good example of this, since most check-ins involve a series of steps that must take place between welcoming a guest to the hotel and giving them their room key. Scripts can have multiple operational benefits, such as providing assurance that customers are reminded of the steps they must follow to complete a service or ensuring that employees relate critical information to each customer (e.g., hotel cancellation policies, where to find the elevator, or descriptions of hotel amenities). Assuming an employee is following the script, managers have assurance that a standard level of service is provided to every customer no matter which employee is involved.⁸ Along the same line, regardless of the employee (or a particular unit of a chain) scripts ensure that restaurant patrons will be seated, place their order, receive their meal, and provide payment—all with a similar service experience.

Scripting also has an impact on customer treatment.⁹ Treatment rules housed within a script include reference to the appropriate demeanor and emotions employees are to portray to customers. The script often will specify the manner in which tasks should be completed and how best to interact with customers. For example, employees may be required to address guests in a formal manner such as referring to guests as “Sir” or “Miss” or by their last name. Or a hotel employee responding to a guest's request with the words “my pleasure” helps the guest to feel appreciated and part of a gracious environment. The general emotional display that employees are expected to convey is one that is positive and pleasant to support hospitable customer treatment.¹⁰

Although service scripting is designed to facilitate customer perceptions of task and treatment benefits, inap-

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Liana Victorino, Rohit Verma and Don G. Wardell. 2013. Service scripting: A Customer's Perspective of Quality. *Production and Operations Management*. Forthcoming.

⁵ This managerial report is based on the following published research: Liana Victorino and Alexander R. Bolinger, Scripting employees: An exploratory analysis of customer perceptions. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*. 53(3) 2012: 196-206.

⁶ Richard B. Chase and Douglas M. Stewart, Make Your Service Fail-Safe. *MIT Sloan Management Review* 35(Spring 1994): 35-44; Douglas M. Stewart, Piecing together service quality: A framework for robust service. *Production and Operations Management* 12 (June 2003): 246-265.

⁷ Christopher H. Lovelock and Jochen Wirtz, *Services Marketing: People, Technology, Strategy*, Sixth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007); and Ian P. McCarthy, Leyland Pitt, and Pierre Berthon, Service Customization Through Dramaturgy, in *Mass Customization: Engineering and Managing Global Operations*, ed. Flavio S. Fogliatto and Giovanni J. C. da Silveira (London: Springer-Verlag Ltd., 2010), 43-64.

⁸ Tansik and Smith, *op.cit.*

⁹ Stewart, *op.cit.*

¹⁰ Gursoy, Dogan, Yasin Boylu, and Umut Avci, Identifying the complex relationships among emotional labor and its correlates. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 30 (2011): 783-794.

EXHIBIT 1

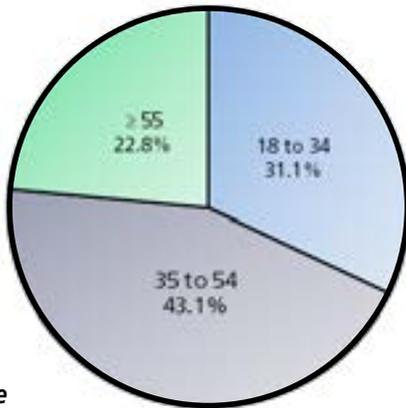
Overview of the potential benefits and risks of script use

| | Task | Treatment |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Example | Employees are required to follow a script at check-in that provides the five steps that must be completed with all customers prior to giving them their room key. | Employees are required at check-in to smile and greet each guest by name if possible, use a pleasant tone when speaking to guests, and thank customers for their business. |
| Potential Benefits | Each customer receives the same pertinent information from employees and a consistent experience across employees. | Each customer feels graciously welcomed to the hotel and like their business is appreciated by the service firm. |
| Potential Risks | Lack of a personalized feel to the service; Employees also may follow the script mindlessly without attending to the needs of the customer. | Customers view the employee's service as inauthentic; Employees also may experience a high degree of emotional labor when the feelings they are required to display are incongruent with what they actually feel. |

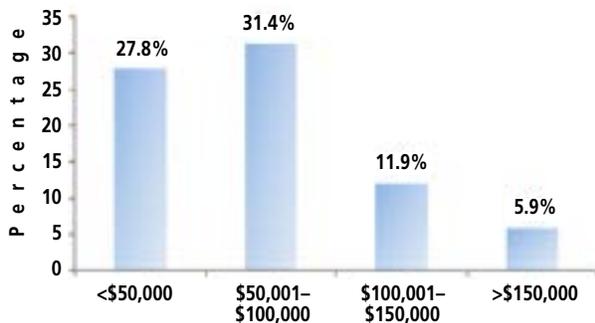
EXHIBIT 2

Sample demographics

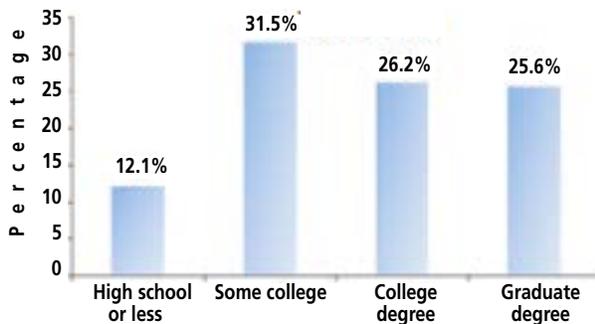
Age



Income



Education



appropriate applications of scripting may also create potential service issues. For instance, in some circumstances predominant script use has been connected to negative service outcomes. Strict adherence to the script can result in employees mindlessly following the script,¹¹ such as when a server offers a daily special that includes meat when the customer had just explained that they are a vegetarian.

Scripts can also result in inappropriate customer treatment, if poorly applied. A firm's rules for customer treatment ultimately depend on how capable the employee is at enacting those rules in an authentic way. Seymour, for example, found that required displays of politeness and happiness by hospitality workers add to the emotional labor of employees,¹² a problematic case when there is a difference between the emotions employees actually feel and the emotions they are required to display. Employees tend to cope with the demands of emotional labor using one of two "acting" strategies: either "surface" or "deep" acting.¹³ Surface acting occurs when employees fake the firm's treatment rules such as saying "thank you" in a bored tone of voice or offering a feigned smile. Employees are said to be deep acting when they put forth the energy to adapt their inward emotions to align with the required outward display.¹⁴ In this case, an employee shows sincerity in thanking and smiling at customers. Exhibit 1 provides an example of the task and treatment elements of scripted service and the potential benefits and risks for each outcome.

¹¹ Blake E. Ashforth, and Yitzhak Fried, The mindlessness of organizational behaviors. *Human Relations* 41(April 1988): 305-329.

¹² Diane Seymour, Emotional labour: A comparison between fast food and traditional service work. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 19 (2000):159-171.

¹³ Arlie R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).

¹⁴ Alicia A. Grandey, Emotion regulation in the workplace: A new way to conceptualize emotional labor. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 5(1) 2000: 95-110

In all of these cases, the key to determining a script's success is the customer's reaction to that script. Thus, we propose that a stronger understanding of how customers perceive script use will help hospitality managers to ensure the effective use of scripts, so that script use adds value to the perceived customer service experience. Therefore, our goals for this study were: (1) establish whether customers perceive task and treatment implications from the use of employee service scripts, (2) if so, determine whether they view the scripts positively or negatively, and (3) examine the influence script use has on customer evaluations of the service experience.

Study Design

To explore customer perceptions of scripted employees, we asked several thousand respondents to write a few sentences about their thoughts of scripted service. We had a market research firm distribute an online survey to a random sample of customers from a database representing a broad cross-section of the United States population in terms of demographics (see Exhibit 2). After refining the data, our sample consisted of 3,008 individuals, of whom 2,407 provided a complete response to the open-ended scripting question.

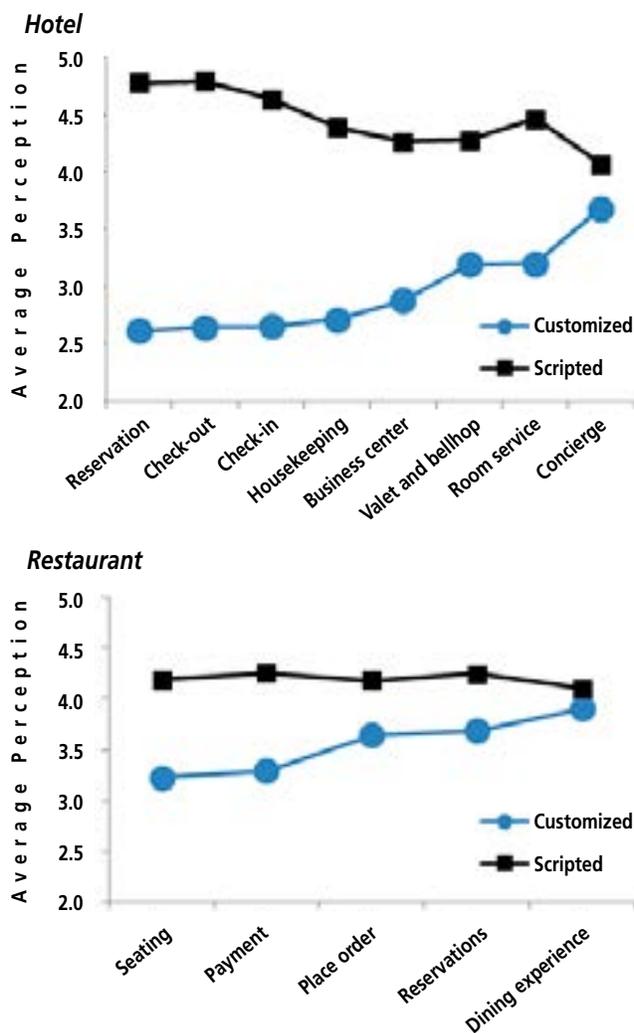
Customer Perceptions of Script Level and Customization Level

Prior to the qualitative analysis, we gave respondents a list of various types of hotel and restaurant encounters and asked them how scripted and how customized they generally perceived these encounters to be (e.g., hotel check-in, table-service dining). We asked respondents to rate these transactions on two dimensions: script level and customization level. Both ratings used a seven point Likert-type scale. On the scripting level, "1" represented perceptions of a highly unscripted approach and a "7" represented perceptions of a highly scripted approach, and for the customization measure, a "1" represented perceptions of low customization and a "7," high levels customization. The results in Exhibit 3 show, for instance, that hotel check-in was perceived by customers as having high scripting and low customization. In contrast, in a concierge encounter, customers perceived the script level to be low and customization high. For restaurant encounters we saw that customers perceived the seating process to be highly scripted and less customized in comparison to the dining experience, which was viewed as being less scripted and more customized. Please note that these findings were not directed to any particular hotel or restaurant chain but instead referred to an overall perception of past experiences within hospitality services.

As illustrated, respondents perceived differences between various encounters both in customization and in script level. The data show that the differences in perceptions are more pronounced in hotel encounters. In general,

EXHIBIT 3

Perceived level of scripting in various services



customers perceived encounters such as making hotel reservations and checking in and out as being the most scripted and least customized. An interesting finding is that on average customers viewed all types of hotel encounters to have fairly high scripting, with all averages being above "4" on the 7-point Likert scale. The restaurant results were less dramatic, with a narrow range of averages. Customers' dining experience after their order had been taken was found to be the most customized part of the service. However, all encounters from pre-dining to dining to post-dining were all fairly similar with regard to average perceived script use.

EXHIBIT 4

Overall service themes

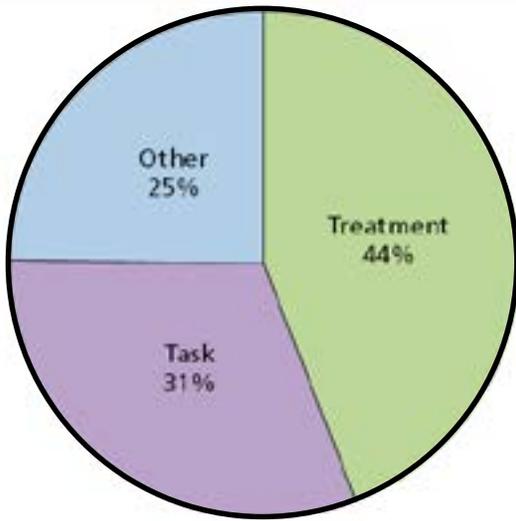
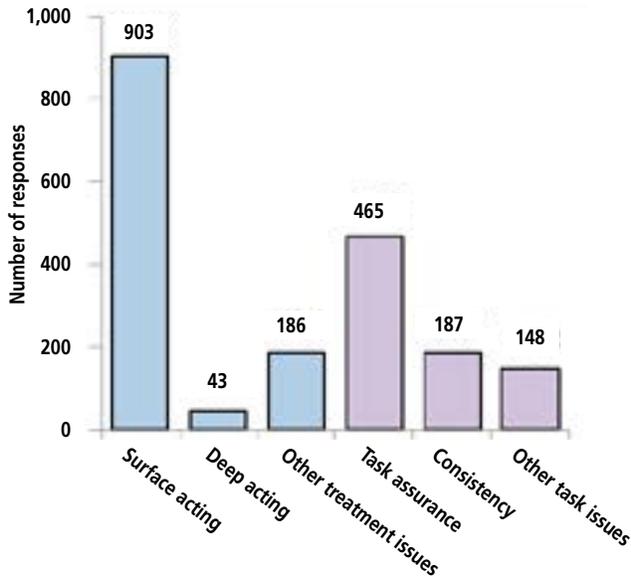


EXHIBIT 5

Frequency of responses for perceived categories



Similar to the hotel interactions, the average was slightly above 4 on the 7-point Likert scale.

Based on these findings, we concluded that customers generally perceive that many hotel and restaurant encounters involve scripts. We found minimal evidence to support the use of improvisational approaches to service delivery from the customer perspective. In addition, customers saw differences in levels of standardization across various encounters. Recognizing that customers perceive the prevalent

use of scripts in the hospitality industry, we next explored the associations customers make toward scripted service.

Qualitative Analysis

The results from the open-ended question about customers' overall opinion of scripted service were investigated using a rigorous method called content analysis, which involves a process of coding qualitative data so that valid insights can be established.¹⁵ In this case, we developed categories representing task and treatment observations and then broke the core themes into sub-categories. The task categories were assurance and consistency, as well as an "other" task category. Most of these statements were about the lack of personalization with scripted service. The treatment categories covered surface and deep acting. The surface acting category included statements about employees' inauthentic or faked performance and deep acting was perceived as authentic and sincere. Again, we created an "other" treatment category, which included a range of statements, from how polite or knowledgeable to how unfriendly or unprofessional scripted employees may seem. We also included an overall "other" category to represent responses that did not fall within the two core themes. This category captured general statements about whether respondents liked or disliked scripts or statements about when scripted service works and when it fails. A "sentiment" rating was also given to each response for how positive, neutral, or negative the statement sounded. Two raters completed the content analysis, and a suitable level of agreement was achieved between them.

Key Themes for Customer Perceptions of Scripted Service: Task versus Treatment

When assessing the open-ended responses for the overall perception of scripted service, we found that respondents commonly associated scripted service with either task or treatment. As shown in Exhibit 4, significantly more respondents focused on treatment implications of scripted service than on task themes.

Next, we conducted an analysis of the sub-categories within the key task and treatment themes, which are shown in Exhibit 5. As depicted, the most commonly reported statement was surface acting, that is, perceptions of inauthentic or robotic service delivery. Statements that fell within the "task assurance" category spoke of how a script helps employees to understand their job and provides training assistance so that even a person new to the job would be able to deliver a standard level of service.

The other categories had many fewer responses than the surface level acting and task assurance sub-categories did. For example, consistency-related statements represented

¹⁵ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004).

23 percent of the task-related responses but only 7 percent of the overall responses. Sixteen percent of the treatment-related statements (7 percent of the overall responses) were considered to be within the “other treatment” category, while only 2 percent of the overall responses reflected perceptions of deep acting (or an authentic delivery of the script).

Customer Sentiments of Scripted Service

The ratings of the overall sentiment of each response are found in Exhibit 6. As shown, almost half of the response sentiments were negative but there was a good portion of responses that had positive or at least neutral outlooks toward scripting. Exhibit 7 provides a descriptive summary of the average sentiment rating analysis for the coding categories in rank order. A “2” represented a positive association, “1” a neutral association, and “0” a negative association. The highest average sentiment rating was for responses associated with deep acting. Not surprisingly, the customer sentiment associated with the task-related categories of assurance and consistency was also positive. However, the “other treatment” category was mixed. Some comments were positive (e.g., scripting made the employee sound professional), whereas others emphasized negative aspects, such as employees seeming unfriendly when scripted. While there were mixed sentiments within the overall “other” category, the average was on the negative side. The majority of the responses in the “other” category were about disliking scripted service. This also was the case for the “other task” category as the majority of the responses were about the limitations that scripts pose to process-related outcomes such as personalization. The lowest average sentiment rating was for responses associated with surface acting.

Incorporating Customer Perceptions for Effective Service Scripting

Based on the findings, customers appeared to perceive scripted service from either a task or treatment perspective. When customers perceived the task-related implications of scripted service they focused mainly on the assurance that script use offers for facilitating a process free from errors or omissions. Conversely, when considering the treatment implications, customers focused more on the scripts’ perceived authenticity issues (e.g., employees who “go through the motions” without sincerity). Overall our findings suggest that customers were more likely to perceive the negative aspects of treatment in their evaluations of scripted services in the hospitality industry. However, our findings also show that there are opportunities for hospitality managers to improve customer perceptions of service quality in scripted service encounters by taking advantage of the positive attributes that script use offers. Below, we propose four key strategies for effective script use and give examples of the practices that

EXHIBIT 6

Overall sentiments toward scripting

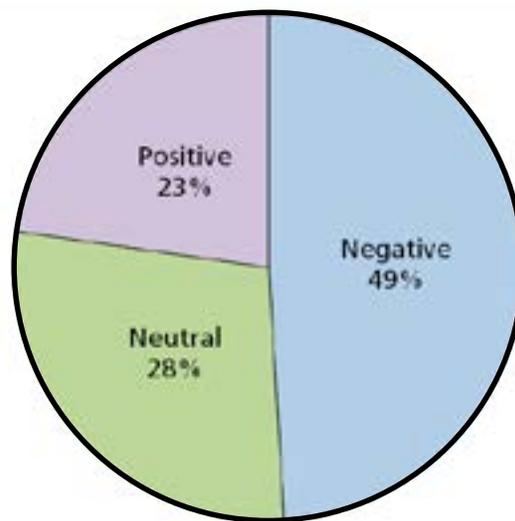
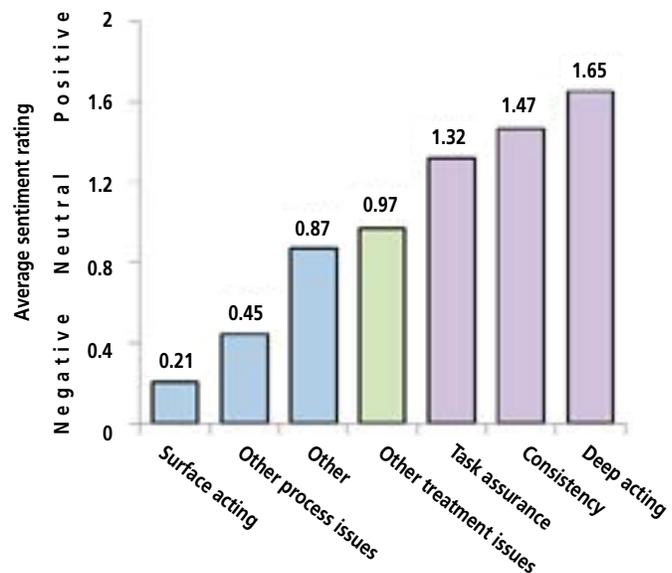


EXHIBIT 7

Sentiment ratings for perceived categories



Strategies for effective script use

| Strategy | Managerial Considerations |
|--|---|
| Make Scripts Flexible | Tailor script level to the service encounter type. |
| | Provide employees with a variety of options for the types of words or phrases they could use during the encounter. |
| | Provide options for how to respond to frequently asked questions of customers. |
| | Use a decision tree approach to designing the script by providing various scripts to use dependent on customer type or situation. |
| | Teach employees improvisation techniques so they feel more empowered to deviate from the script successfully when necessary. |
| | Role-play with employees scenarios of when script deviation may be advantageous. |
| Balance the Task and Treatment Tradeoff | Tailor the script level to the service encounter type. |
| | Survey customers to understand their expectations for each service encounter type. Then incorporate customer perceptions and priorities into script design. |
| | Assess your company's service strategy and ensure it is aligned with the chosen scripting approach. |
| Foster Authenticity in Script Delivery | Include as a key employee selection criteria personality characteristics such as extroversion and emotional stability. Also search for individuals who display genuine positivity. |
| | Provide employee training for how to regulate their emotions. |
| | Teach employees acting techniques and consider using a theater company or acting school to aid the process. |
| | Use customer empathy building exercises. |
| | Role-play different service encounters with employees. |
| | Videotape employees as they learn the script so they can become more self-aware about how their service may be perceived by customers. |
| | Use coaching techniques to provide performance feedback and support authentic service delivery. |
| Gain Employee Investment in the Script | Get employee feedback about a particular script. |
| | Develop teams of employees to develop a script that they feel will best serve customers. Use this script to motivate discussion about ways to improve future scripts and learn about the current service level. |
| | Use employee feedback in future versions of the script. |

will help hospitality managers to achieve each strategy. Summarized in Exhibit 8, they are: adding flexibility to scripts, balancing the script's task and treatment tradeoff, developing employees' sincerity, and gaining buy-in to scripts.

Flexible Scripts

Hospitality managers who use a relatively strict approach to scripting may want to consider giving employees greater flexibility, such as allowing employees some discretion over how they follow the script. Respondents often described the inauthentic feel of scripted service (35% of all responses), and our preliminary analysis suggested that customers view most hospitality encounters as being scripted. We surmise that the overall perception of robotic employees may be due to the use of rigid forms of scripting. Flexible scripts, on

the other hand, allow room for variation in areas such as word choice, or they recommend deviation from the script in particular circumstances. For example, having a menu of phrases to use to close the service encounter, such as "have a nice day," "hope you enjoy your day," or "see you again soon," would allow employees to select the phrases they use with customers so that they are able to fully embrace and authentically enact the script. Research has also found that for customized encounters such as concierge service, customers actually prefer a more relaxed approach to script use where employees are allowed substantial discretion.¹⁶ A hospitality firm can benefit from the control and consistency that scripting affords for some encounters but should also

¹⁶ Victorino, Verma, and Wardell, *op.cit.*

consider using more flexible forms of scripting for other encounters. Therefore, when an encounter requires tailoring service to individual needs, hospitality managers may want to consider allowing employees the discretion to improvise from the script at times in an attempt to mitigate the negative “inauthentic” aspects and increase the positive perceptions of the experience.

Balance the Task and Treatment Tradeoff

Our finding that customers do not ignore the process benefits of scripting is important, because in many hospitality situations completing the task correctly and efficiently is more important than focusing on customer treatment. This is particularly true in a quick-service restaurant, where the task tends to reign supreme (i.e., the speed and completeness of food delivery). Many cases are like that of the QSR, where customers may perceive script use more positively since the scripts are used for relatively routine types of encounters and situations that require a set series of tasks to be completed in order for the service objective to be achieved. Conversely, flexible scripts may be better suited in instances where customer treatment or the emotional connection between the employee and customer is the uppermost consideration. This is not to say that excellent treatment can substitute for task errors such as not getting your food order right. Nor does this mean that task can replace treatment, such as the server getting your order right but being insincere during the encounter. Rather, there are situations where customers are well aware of the tradeoffs between the task and treatment implications of scripting. Incorporating these customer perceptions and understanding customer priorities for how services are perceived under different circumstances will aid managers to select the right degree of scripting.

Fostering Authentic Script Delivery

Hospitality managers may also want to encourage employees to internalize the script so their service is perceived more authentically by customers. One way to do this is to enhance “deep acting” of employees through hiring and training practice. For example, hiring for particular personality characteristics such as extroversion and emotional stability has been found to increase customer satisfaction.¹⁷ Training employees to be cognizant of their own emotional state and how to regulate emotions or to use techniques that encourage empathy could also promote authentic service delivery.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hui Liao, and Aichia Chuang, A multilevel investigation of factors influencing employee service performance and customer outcomes. *Academy of Management Journal* 47(1) 2004: 41-58.

¹⁸ Peter Totterdell and Brian Parkinson, Use and effectiveness of self-regulation strategies for improving mood in a group of trainee teachers. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 4(3) 1999: 219-232; and Peter Totterdell and David Holman, Emotional regulation in customer service roles: Testing a model of emotional labor. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 8(1) 2003: 55-73.

For example, some hotel chains have hired trainers from theater companies to train staff.¹⁹ Training techniques that empower employees to take care of the customer have also been suggested as a way to support the emotional requirements of hospitality service.²⁰ These training techniques might include role-playing an array of encounters that the employee may face throughout the job, videotaping employees’ service so they have the opportunity to see how their service delivery including body language and tone may be perceived by customers, or using coaching strategies to give actionable feedback to employees so they can sincerely deliver the script.

Employee Investment in the Script

When developing the script it may be advantageous for hospitality managers to get employees involved in the process so they feel more engaged with the script. Not only are employees great sources of information, given their intimate knowledge of the intricacies and requirements of the service encounter, but being involved in script development will also help empower the employees to take ownership of the script. In particular, companies could develop teams comprising employees who already have a strong understanding of the company culture. Ask these teams to develop a script that could be used to train a new hire, and solicit feedback from the team to understand why particular words, phrases, or incidents were included in the script. This will help managers to learn what elements employees feel are most important to include within the script and what adjustments may be necessary for future scripts. Acting upon employee feedback will further add to employees’ feelings of script investment. By using such methods, employees will more likely understand the underlying meaning of the script so they will be able to authentically deliver the scripted service. Also, if employees feel a vested interest in the script, they will likely have greater motivation to see the script succeed.

Conclusion

The perceived service experience is enhanced when those involved with the design or management of encounters understand the impact of scripting on customer perceptions of the encounter. This managerial report will help hospitality managers to become more aware of how customers perceive scripted interactions so they can thoughtfully design and use scripts in a way that will positively influence customer perceptions. Paying attention to the voice of the customer allows hospitality managers to have greater confidence that their use of scripting will satisfy customers and keep them coming back. ■

¹⁹ B. DeLollis, Hotels train employees to think fast. *USA Today*, online edition: http://www.usatoday.com/money/biztravel/2006-11-28-hipper-hotels-usat_x.htm. Accessed September 25, 2012.

²⁰ Gursoy et al., *op.cit.*

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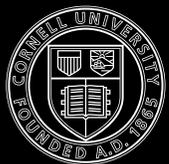
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