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From the Editor

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# A Caution and a Call

## A Need to Examine the Relationship between Intent and Actions

Three birds sit on a wire; two of them decide that they intend to leave. How many are left? The answer: three, because until the intent turns into action, nothing has happened.

The connection between intent and action is often unstudied in research, largely because it is much easier to ask people about their intent rather than to find out about their actual actions. For example, when studying employees, it is much easier to ask individuals about their intent to leave; it is harder to follow up on employees and find out whether they actually left. Research has shown that intent to turn over is actually a good predictor of turnover.<sup>1</sup> However, the relationship, while strong, is less than perfect.

As editor of the *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, I have repeatedly seen the study of intentions, with little consideration of how these intentions actually turn into action. In particular,



I have seen many studies involving hotels and restaurants look at customer intent, be it the intent to make a subsequent purchase or simply to return. The intent to return is often viewed as a critical outcome for hospitality practitioners and papers, but I have yet to see work looking at the connection between this intent and action. Without any idea of the true relationship between intent and action, we may be looking at an irrelevant outcome. While I personally expect that there is at least some relationship between repeat-purchase intentions and later repeat-purchasing behavior, I do not think we can accurately assess the value of high repeat-purchase-intention results. I am thus calling for researchers to consider this question: what is the relationship between customer intentions and actual behavior?

The reason for my concern goes back to my training in the area of human resources management. Research has shown that intent to turn over is the best predictor

of turnover, suggesting a correlation of 0.36 to 0.50. For the sake of argument, let us accept the largest value, 0.50, as correct. In social sciences, this is generally seen as a strong predictor; however, when it comes down to making specific predictions, there is still a lot of error inherent in that statistic. For example, if the base rate of turnover for a given hotel is 50 percent, then someone who expresses a strong intent to turnover (say, a 7 on a 7-point scale)<sup>2</sup> has a 72 percent chance of actually leaving the company. In other words, people who expressed the highest possible intent on our scale still have a 28 percent chance of not doing what they said they intended to do. Persons who rated their intentions as a 6 would have a 61 percent chance of leaving. Having information on the relationship between intentions and turnover, in addition to an individual's scores, gives us the chance to make individual predictions. However, on a case-by-case basis, it is not necessarily a good prediction.

Now, consider the relationship between customers' intent to return and their actual return. How strong is this relationship? How often do people return?<sup>3</sup> I would suspect the relationship between intent to make a repeat purchase and actual repeat purchase is far weaker than the relationship between the intent to turn over and the actual turnover. I expect this because there are many more circumstances that must occur for repeat-purchase intent to turn into action. For a hotel, the customer must be traveling back to the same location; for a restaurant, perhaps the individual would have to have a similar event that caused the decision to dine out. There are also many other factors affecting possible repeat-purchase behavior, including loyalty programs, company policy, and availability

on e-distribution channels. It is possible that ratings of repeat-purchase intentions reflect only satisfaction; due to other circumstances, the opportunity to return may never present itself again to even the most satisfied of customers.

In sum, one of the biggest problems I see with the body of work published in the *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* is this lack of attention to actual behavior. It is my hope that this gap will begin to be filled. It is my view that looking at behavior will be critical for understanding all aspects of how hospitality practice (from operations, to human resources, to service culture, to marketing, to sales) affect companies' bottom lines. If we do not know the connection between intentions and behavior, then much of our research assessing customers' attitudes may be meaningless—*M.C.S.*

#### Endnotes

1. Such studies include R. P. Steel and N. K. Ovalle, "A Review and Meta-analysis of Research on the Relationship between Behavior Intentions and Employee Turnover," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 69, no. 4 (1984), pp. 673–86; and R. P. Tett and J. P. Meyer, "Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment, Turnover Intention, and Turnover: Path Analyses Based on Meta-analytic Findings," *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 46 (1993), pp. 259–93.
2. For those interested in the math, I am assuming that a score of 7 signifies someone who is two standard deviations above the mean.
3. Note that the further the base rate deviates from 50 percent, the less likely it is to be able to predict an outcome. So, if on average, 20 percent of customers return every year, then even a strong relationship between intent to return and return for a very positive customer (i.e.,  $r = 0.50$ , and the customer is two standard deviations above average in terms of his or her intent to return) yields a predicted probability of return of 35 percent.