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Cornell Hospitality Report

An Examination of Guest Complaints and Complaint
Communication Channels: The Medium Does Matter!

by Alex M. Susskind, Ph.D.





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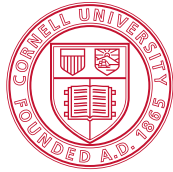
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An Examination of Guest Complaints and Complaint Communication Channels:

The Medium Does Matter!

By Alex M. Susskind

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex M. Susskind, Ph.D., is an associate professor of food-service management at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration (ams76@cornell.edu). His research is based primarily in organizational communication and organizational behavior. He is currently researching **(a)** the influence of customer–service provider interaction as it relates to organizational effectiveness and efficiency from the perspective of guests, employees, and managers; and **(b)** the influence of communication relationships upon individuals’ work-related attitudes and perceptions surrounding organizational events and processes such as teamwork and downsizing. His research has been published in leading hospitality-related journals such as the *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, and *Journal of Travel Research*. His research has also been published in leading journals in the fields of communication and management such as *Communication Research* and the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this study guests of casual-dining restaurants were asked to report how they preferred to complain about service failures they experienced while dining. Guests who reported higher levels of frustration, a higher propensity to complain, and greater information inadequacy generally preferred to complain face-to face to a manager or via a letter written to management. This finding diverges from the expectations created by communication theory, which suggests that face-to-face communication is “richer” than written approaches. Moreover, this study found that complaints lodged face-to-face to nonmanagerial service employees were viewed similarly to complaining via a comment card—a less-rich mode of communication.

An Examination of Guest Complaints and Complaint Communication Channels: The Medium Does Matter!

By Alex M. Susskind

Communication between guests and service providers is an essential part of restaurant service. Throughout a service experience, information is exchanged about products and services offered and received. During that time (and shortly thereafter) guests make assessments about their experience in the restaurant and determine whether their expectations have been met.

When a service failure occurs guests may seek to remedy the problem by complaining directly to the service provider while they are still in the restaurant, or they can leave without lodging a complaint or resolving the problem. When guests leave unsatisfied, two problems result. First, it is difficult for the restaurateur to offer a service recovery, and second, it places the burden of communicating the complaint and associated dissatisfaction solely on the guest. As a result, guests' concerns about a service failure can extend beyond the restaurant's four walls and well beyond the time that the service occurred.

Most restaurant and hotel operators are aware of the importance of soliciting and receiving guests' complaints in a timely manner. Creating a better understanding of how guests formulate and lodge their complaints should provide operators with additional tools to improve service and offer the appropriate remedies when complaints are made. Additionally, the complaint-management process provides operators with direct feedback and insight from their guests' point of view.

This report offers two theoretical frameworks as the foundation for a better understanding of the complaint process and guests' tendencies to complain. The founda-

tions offered by the frustration-aggression hypothesis and guests' perceptions of the complaint process,¹ coupled with elements of media richness theory² are presented as a guiding framework to show how guests make decisions regarding whether and how to complain about service failures. First I will explain those theories and then explain how they apply to service experiences.

Complaint Communication Channels

Depending on the timing and severity of a given service failure guests will evaluate several factors when selecting the medium for lodging a complaint. The "richness" of each communication medium is characterized by the following four qualities of information-carrying ability and exchange: (1) the guest's desire for feedback once the complaint has been delivered (i.e., feedback can be instantaneous, delayed, or not possible), (2) the method of sending the message, (i.e., the number of communication channels and cues used to convey the message, whether oral, written, non-verbal, or a combination thereof), (3) the ability to tailor communication to individual circumstances, and (4) the focus of the communication—that is, to whom the message is directed and for what purpose (e.g., a line-level employee or a manager).³

When faced with the need to communicate a complaint—based on the idea of communication-channel richness—guests will first examine the severity of the service failure, consider the different communication modes available for a complaint, and select the most appropriate communication channel or the combination of channels. The guests will choose the communication channel which they believe will facilitate sending the most efficient communication or initiate the receipt of the most relevant information. Based on the four qualities of a message, for example, face-to-face

communication is considered the "richest" communication mode because it allows for immediate feedback, generally employs multiple cues, can be customized to individual circumstances, and can be directed and received at multiple sources simultaneously.⁴

Complaint Behavior

The three main influences on complaint behavior are propensity to complain when dissatisfied, perceived inadequacy of information about service experiences, and perceived frustration with service experiences.⁵ These three influences are likely to influence the complaining guest's selection of a communication channel.

Propensity to complain. The guest's decision regarding whether to complain typically involves the following four factors: (1) an evaluation of the relevance of the service failure, (2) the guest's knowledge of and experience with similar service-based failures, (3) the specific limitations of complaining in the particular instance, and (4) the likelihood of a complaint's success.⁶ Based on these elements, guests determine the extent to which they believe that (1) they are able to complain effectively about the dissatisfying situation and (2) their complaint(s) will lead to a desired remedy or expectancy.⁷ In the aggregate, this schema of the complaint process illustrates how guests form specific attitudes and beliefs toward the act of complaining and how they assign value to it. This process could be defined as a global attitude toward complaining which is based on a collection of many experiences, not one alone.⁸ When a guest experiences a service failure and determines that a remedy might be required, the guest will apply his or her global attitude about complaining as a lens through which to determine whether to complain about that particular service failure and, if a complaint is to be made, the communication channel to be used for that complaint.

Information inadequacy. As guests evaluate the conditions surrounding a service failure they will likely seek information to help process and put closure on the failure and its surrounding circumstances. With mitigating information, the guest is able to make attributions about the

¹ See: L. Berkowitz, "Frustration-aggression Hypothesis: Examination and Reformulation," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 106, No. 1 (1989), 59-73; and J. Dollard, L. Doob, N. Miller, O. Mowrer, and R. Sears, *Frustration and Aggression* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939). Also see: R.L. Day, "Modeling Choices among Alternative Responses to Dissatisfaction," *Advances in Consumer Research*, 11, 496-499; A.M. Susskind, "I Told You So! Restaurant Consumers' Word-of-mouth Communication," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (May (2002), pp. 75-85; A.M. Susskind, "Consumer Frustration in the Guest-Server Exchange: The Role of Attitudes toward Complaining and Information Inadequacy Related to Service Failures," *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2004), pp. 200-223; and A.M. Susskind, "A Content Analysis of Consumer Complaints, Remedies, and Repatronage Intentions Regarding Dissatisfying Service Experiences," *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2005), pp. 150-169.

² R.L. Daft and R.H. Lengel, "Information Richness: A New Approach to Managerial Information Processing and Organizational Design," *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 6 (1984), pp. 191-233; and R.L. Daft and R.H. Lengel, "Organizational Information Requirements, Media Richness, and Structural Design," *Management Science*, Vol. 32 (1986), pp. 554-571.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Susskind (2004), *op.cit.*

⁶ R.L. Day, "Modeling Choices among Alternative Responses to Dissatisfaction," *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 11 (1984), pp. 496-499.

⁷ J. Singh, "Consumer Complaint Intentions and Behavior: Definitional and Taxonomical Issues," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (1988), pp. 93-107; J. Singh and R.E. Wilkes, "When Consumers Complain: A Path Analysis of the Key Antecedents of Consumer Complaint Response Estimates," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1996), pp. 350-365; and A.M. Susskind, "Efficacy and Outcome Expectations Related to Guest Complaints about Service Experiences," *Communication Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2000), pp. 353-378.

⁸ Susskind (2002), *op.cit.*; Susskind (2004), *op.cit.*; and Susskind (2005), *op.cit.*

service failure and determine how serious the failure is and what should be done about it. If insufficient or inaccurate information is provided to the guest following a service failure, it adds uncertainty to the service experience, limits the guest's ability to evaluate the cause of the service failure, and likely leads to frustration on the part of the guest.⁹ A classic example of this phenomenon happens daily at airports when flights are delayed or canceled. Time and time again, displaced and ultimately unhappy airline passengers sit at the gate desperately waiting for even the smallest morsel of information to help them understand and process the circumstances of their recently modified itineraries. Not having sufficient forthright information about the service failure (i.e., delay) leads to frustration for the guest.

Guest frustration. The frustration-aggression hypothesis suggests that when expected outcomes are blocked guests' frustration increases and they are more likely to complain about the service failure.¹⁰ This phenomenon was demonstrated by Harris in a field experiment. Harris observed the result when confederates cut in front of guests who were waiting in line for retail services. He found that guests became more frustrated with the "line cutting" as the length of the lines increased.¹¹ This suggests that guest frustration emerges when guests see an object that blocks their receiving a product or service they are waiting for. Frustrated guests are more likely to complain¹² and are more likely to require a rich communication interaction to resolve their feelings of frustration with the service experience.

With that background, this report tests the following three research hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Guests who report a higher propensity to complain will prefer to use richer communication channels to express their dissatisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Guests who report a higher need for information regarding service failures will prefer to use richer communication channels to lodge their dissatisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Guests who report a higher level of guest frustration will prefer to use richer communication channels to lodge their dissatisfaction.

⁹ C. Fornell and R.A. Westbrook, "An Exploratory Study of Assertiveness, Aggressiveness, and Consumer Complaining Behavior," *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 6 (1979), pp. 105-110; and Susskind (2004), *op.cit.*

¹⁰ L. Berkowitz, "Frustration-aggression Hypothesis: Examination and Reformulation," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 106, No. 1 (1989), pp. 59-73; and Dollard *et al.*, *op.cit.*

¹¹ M.B. Harris, "Mediators between Frustration and Aggression in a Field Experiment," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (1974), pp. 561-571.

¹² Susskind (2004), *op.cit.*

EXHIBIT 1

Communication-channel preferences

Preferred Communication Channel	Number	Percentage
Face-to-face with Manager	246	49
Face-to-face with Employee	140	28
Written (letter, e-mail, web)	76	15
Comment Card	42	8

Participants and Procedure

To test the three hypotheses, I solicited written survey responses from 504 shopping mall patrons over a six-month period, using a table set up in the mall's food court. Fifty-nine percent of the participants were women, and the sample's mean age was 32.¹³ They reported that they dine out 3.11 times per week on average for lunch and 2.53 times per week for dinner. We offered a \$1.00 lottery ticket as an incentive to complete the survey.

Each guest was asked to report his or her perceptions about the process when they had recent occasion to complain about an aspect of their meal at a casual-dining restaurant. Guests indicated the extent of their agreement or disagreement with 15 statements that measured the participants' perceptions of attitude toward complaining (i.e., propensity to complain), the extent to which any information received from service providers was sufficient to understand the complaint process (i.e., information inadequacy), and perceived frustration in service settings (i.e., guest frustration).¹⁴

The participants were also asked to specify the communication channel they used to lodge the complaint, choosing from (1) face-to-face with a manager, (2) face-to-face with an employee, (3) written (either letter, email, or the web), or (4) using comment cards in the restaurant. As shown in Exhibit 1, 49 percent of the guests surveyed preferred to complain to the manager face-to-face; 28 percent preferred to complain to an employee face-to-face; 15 percent, via written communication directed to management; and 8 percent, via a card. None of the respondents preferred to make

¹³ Participants' median age was 26, with a standard deviation of 14.58.

¹⁴ Using a five-point, Likert-type scale, participants' guest frustration was measured with three items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$); perceived information inadequacy was measured with five items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$); see: Susskind (2004), *op.cit.* Attitudes toward complaining were measured with four items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$) developed by Day, *op.cit.* Cronbach's α determines the extent to which the items in the questionnaire are related to each other, providing an overall index of the repeatability or internal consistency of the scale as a whole. A coefficient of .70 or greater is considered sufficiently reliable or internally consistent.

EXHIBIT 2**Descriptive statistics and correlations**

	Mean	Std. Dev.	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Propensity to Complain	3.69	.80	—		
(2) Information Inadequacy	4.05	.67	.36**	—	
(3) Guest Frustration	3.59	.97	.32**	.52**	—

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed), Listwise $N = 504$.

a telephone call. In general, then, over three-quarters of the respondents used face-to-face communication when lodging complaints, and over two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they preferred to complain to directly a manager through either face-to-face or via written communication.

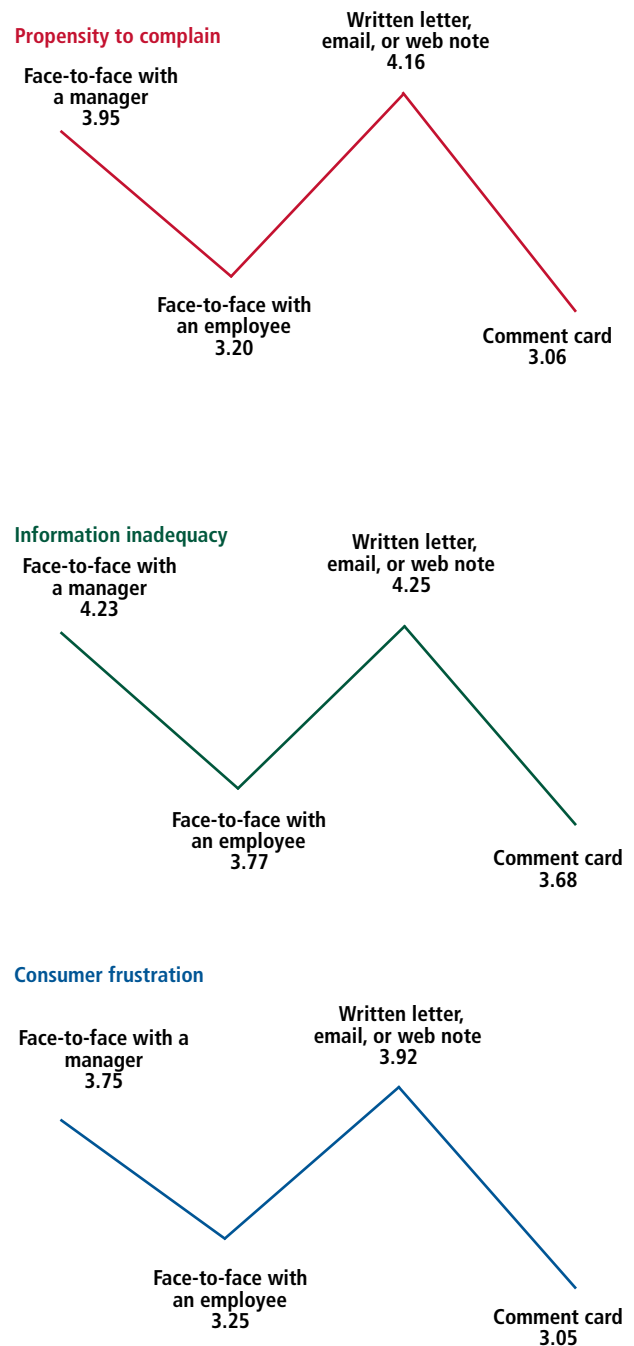
Analyses. To address the three hypotheses presented above, the mean values of propensity to complain, information inadequacy, and guest frustration were compared to the four channels of complaint communication to determine whether there was a notable difference in consumers' reactions to the complaint process based on the mode of communication they reported they used to complain.¹⁵

Summary and Discussion of the Findings

The descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Exhibit 2 and show a strong interrelationship among propensity to complain, information inadequacy, and perceived guest frustration. The one-way ANOVAs revealed that richer communication channels were not consistently used by all of the respondents who reported high levels of propensity to complain, information inadequacy, and perceived guest frustration, providing mixed support for the application of a media-richness complaint framework (see Exhibit 3).

In the test of hypothesis 1, guests who reported a higher propensity to complain about dissatisfying experiences indicated that they preferred to complain directly to a manager in person (mean = 3.95) or to draft a letter to management (mean = 4.16). On the other hand, guests who reported a lower propensity to complain preferred to direct

¹⁵ One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the significance of the differences along with a post-hoc Duncan's multiple range test. The one-way ANOVA procedure examines the differences for a quantitative dependent variable (in this case guest frustration, information inadequacy, and propensity to complain) by a single factor independent variable (in this preferred mode of communication). Analysis of variance is used to test the hypothesis that several means are equal and is an extension of the two-sample t-test. After the means are compared and differences have been noted among the means, post hoc tests show which means differ.

EXHIBIT 3**Results from the one-way analysis of variance**

Note: Numbers on the charts are the mean responses for each variable by communication channel on a scale of 1 = low to 5 = high.

Survey respondents went directly to management for large service failures.

their complaints to line-level employees (mean = 3.20) or use a comment card (mean = 3.06).¹⁶ The preference to communicate directly with management by those with a high propensity to complain supports the media-richness idea, but their choosing a letter to management over face-to-face communication with an employee is contrary to a strict media-richness classification.

This finding indicates that when guests determine that a line-level employee is unable (or unwilling) to help, they will seek the channel they believe will be most effective in addressing their complaint. In this case, a written letter to management was viewed as a proxy for dealing with management in the restaurant. These findings are consistent with an earlier study that shows guests view complaints given to line-level employees differently from those given to management.¹⁷

Here's one explanation for why the complaint might be made by a letter to management after the fact rather than in person with the server. If a guest has been waiting for a refill of his or her water glass, the most common action by a guest would be to remind the server about the requested refill. Because this is a simple request that is often overlooked by servers, is not too complicated, and is easily remedied, a face-to-face communication between the guest and the server should conveniently remedy the minor service failure—presumably ending the matter. But let's take this one step further. Say that when the guest asks for the refill, the server says, "I heard you the first time you asked. I'm too busy right now." That response from the server would likely prompt a different response from the guest. From the guest's perspective based on that interaction, it is likely that if he or she decides to complain it will be through a more substantial, hierarchical communication channel. In this case, the service experience shifted from a relatively minor service failure

to a situation that cannot be resolved by further discussion with the server. Instead, the guest will likely want to direct any communication to a manager (a richer communication channel by definition).

In the test of hypothesis 2, guests who reported a higher need for information (i.e., information inadequacy) during service failures indicated that they preferred to complain directly to a manager in person (mean = 4.23) or to draft a letter to management (mean = 4.25). Conversely, guests who reported a lower need for mitigating information in connection with their complaint preferred to direct their complaints to line-level employees (mean = 3.77) or to use a comment card (mean = 3.68).¹⁸ Again while inconsistent with a strict media-richness framework, these findings show that guests who require mitigating information regarding service failures and remedies prefer to get that information from management directly, rather than from line-level employees or from a response to a comment-card submission.

Last, in the test of hypothesis 3, the same pattern emerged as in the previous two research questions. Those guests who reported being more frustrated as a result of service failures indicated that they preferred to complain directly to a manager in person (mean = 3.75) or to draft a letter to management (mean = 3.92). Those guests who reported a lower level of frustration preferred to direct their complaints to line-level employees (mean = 3.25) or via a comment card (mean = 3.05).¹⁹

Although I found that guests will use a variety of communication channels to lodge complaints, a pure media-richness typology did not consistently apply to these results.

¹⁶ The one-way ANOVA results revealed significant differences among the means ($F(3,501) = 57.95, p < .000$). Results from Duncan's multiple range tests indicated that face-to-face communication with a manager and a written letter to management were statistically different from both face-to-face communication with an employee and a organizationally provided comment card at the $p < .05$ level.

¹⁷ Susskind (2005), *op.cit.*

¹⁸ The one-way ANOVA results revealed significant differences among the means ($F(3,501) = 23.21, p < .000$). Results from Duncan's multiple range tests indicated that face-to-face communication with a manager and a written letter to management were statistically different from both face-to-face communication with an employee and a organizationally provided comment card at the $p < .05$ level.

¹⁹ The one-way ANOVA results revealed significant differences among the means ($F(3,501) = 16.49, p < .000$). Results from Duncan's multiple range tests indicated that face-to-face communication with a manager and a written letter to management were statistically different from both face-to-face communication with an employee and a organizationally provided comment card at the $p < .05$ level.

That is, guests do not always choose the richest communication channel, which is face-to-face communication, for their complaints. Instead, they consider a letter to management to be a reasonable stand-in for a direct conversation with the manager. Thus, interaction directly with management is a distinguishing characteristic of the communication-channel preferences of the respondents to this study. Even though a letter to management is theoretically less rich than complaining directly to a line-level employee, a letter often scored higher than communications to employees. Instead, complaining directly to employees (theoretically, a rich channel) was viewed as being in many ways similar to a comment card, the least rich communication channel. These findings suggest that guests view complaints delivered at the line level as less potent than complaints delivered directly to management.

Managerial Implications

As a starting point, guests who are not satisfied with a service experience may not complain, depending upon the circumstances and their own evaluation of the service failure. Getting guests to complain when they are not fully satisfied remains a challenge for service operators. When guests do decide to complain, this study shows variations in to whom and how they complain. Unpleasant though they may be, complaints constitute direct feedback from guests. As a consequence, effective complaint management is a key to building long-term relationships between guests and service providers. When a complaint is lodged, the service provider has a limited window of time to address and resolve the complaint.

While this study did not specifically measure the severity of the complaints reported, it seems that complainers who had what they believed to be serious complaints wanted to communicate directly with management (either face-to-face or in writing) and by-pass dealing with the line-level service staff. This can be interpreted to mean that when guests decide to complain directly to management, they believe that their concerns have risen beyond what the line-level employees can resolve. My suggestion in such cases is that manage-

ment should assess the specific elements of the reported failure, identify root causes, and offer a remedy to resolve the failure for the guest. It is also important to provide the guest with a reasonable explanation for the failure, and take responsibility for the failure without making excuses.

This is not to say that complaints lodged via comment cards or directly to service staff members are not important. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents reported that they took their complaints directly to the service staff. It seems that direct complaints to line-level service staff often can be easily resolved within the context of the service episode. If the service failure is not complex and can easily be identified and addressed, it should be handled quickly at the line level if possible. Management should, however, track all failures and remedies to ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated and fewer mistakes are made over time.

This study provides insight into behavioral and attitudinal characteristics of guests when they are unhappy with a part of the customer-server exchange. This information provides a basic framework for operators to begin to inform and train staff to understand the nuances of the guest-complaint process and clearly delineates the modes of communication that match guests' approaches to seek closure on a failed restaurant experience.

A note on written complaints is warranted as well, given the weight our respondents accorded them. When a guest takes the time to write a letter or complete a comment card including contact information, it is crucial that a timely response be offered to the guest. Because there is a notable time lag in the recovery process for written complaints once the guest has left the restaurant, a clear policy needs to be set to guide managers' responses and timing in resolving after-the-fact complaints. Complaints handled within the four walls of the restaurant often provide management with an advantage in service recovery because all of the information and circumstances surrounding the problem are still active. In the restaurant you can directly ask guests how they would like to have their complaint resolved. This study indicates that guests who have made written complaints are also looking for an exchange of information. For that purpose,

sometimes a complaint letter should be followed up with a phone call in addition to a written response to ensure that the service failure is being fully addressed and that a reasonable solution for both parties is reached.

Issues for Further Consideration

While this study focused only on consumers' complaints relative to restaurant experiences, it is possible that this study can be of use to managers of other hospitality and service-related businesses too. Understanding why guests have complained (i.e., the causes of service failures) and how they lodge their complaint (i.e., the communication channels chosen) is the first step to being able to offer consistent, timely, and appropriate service recoveries. Complaints received via different communication channels are based on a varying set of guest perceptions and need to be handled as such.

Even within the food-service industry there are differences in guests' expectations for service. Because this study

focused only on service experiences among casual-dining customers, a broad range of service expectations was not captured in the data. What might be considered a minor mistake or annoyance by the respondents to this study may be viewed as a considerable problem guests at, say, upscale restaurants.

A limitation of this study was that the guests were not asked to report their perceptions of how severe the service failure was that led to their complaints. In each case, however, the service failure was sufficient for the guest to lodge a complaint in one form or another. Similar to an earlier study that I published,²⁰ future studies should expand upon the analysis of service failures to examine specific failures and the severity of service failures to better understand the complexities of service recovery with the goal of continuous service improvement. ■

²⁰ Susskind (2005), *op.cit.*

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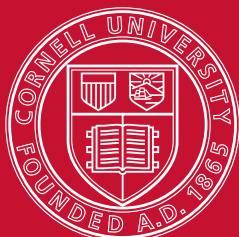
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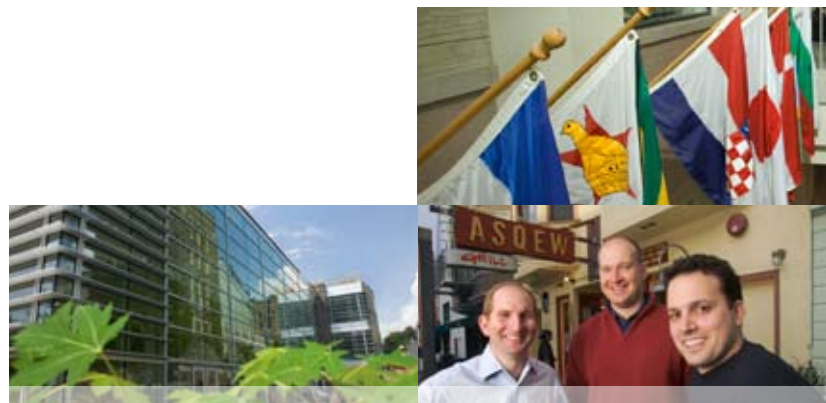
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