# Cornell Hospitality Report

## Managing Context to Improve Cruise Line Service Relationships

by Judi Brownell, Ph.D.

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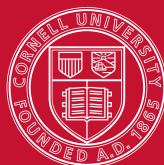
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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Interactions between customers and service employees have a strong influence on customers' perceptions of service quality and their overall satisfaction. During service encounters, both physical and social dimensions of the service environment affect interpersonal dynamics and the subsequent relationships that develop. The study described here focuses specifically on the cruise experience and the distinct passenger-service employee relationships that develop during a cruise. An extensive review of related research combined with interviews and observations on six cruises suggests a framework of four specific role relationships: the passenger as expert, the passenger as manager, the passenger as friend, and the passenger as a team member. By focusing on dimensions of the context in which service occurs, managers can anticipate the types of relationship that develop. They are then better prepared to address the service challenges most likely to occur as they strive to enhance service delivery.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Judi Brownell**, Ph.D., is a professor of management and organizational behavior at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration. She teaches courses in organizational behavior and management communication, has international teaching experience, and her on-line eCornell executive courses are taken worldwide. Brownell's research projects include studies on managerial listening behavior and the competencies required for global hospitality leaders. She has created tools to assess employee-organization fit and the communication of service values. Her current research focuses on listening as it relates to communicating and maintaining service quality standards in the international cruise industry. The author of several textbooks. Brownell has published over 80 articles and serves on several editorial boards. She is also past president of the International Listening Association and has received awards for her research in this field. Brownell has conducted training and consulting for a wide range of hospitality organizations. Among her projects, she has designed assessment centers for hospitality leadership development. Brownell has served as the school's associate dean for academic affairs, dean of students, and director for graduate studies. She has also been academic area director for both the organization behavior and management communication disciplines.

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A critical yet often overlooked variable that influences service interactions is the place where service occurs, or what Mary Jo Bitner called the servicescape.[1] Although cruise ships have much in common with hotels, the ship presents a distinct and particularly encompassing context that both facilitates and constrains service-related interactions.[2] The shipboard environment creates a rich arena for examining the ways in which both physical and social dimensions influence service dynamics. This paper focuses on four service relationships shaped by the cruise ship context, or what Cornell Professor Rob Kwortnik terms the "ShipScape."[3]

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[1] M.J. Bitner, "Servicescapes: The impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 56 No. 2 (1992), pp.57-71.

[2] D.E. Conlon, L. Van Dyne, K.Y. Ng, and M. Milner, "The effects of physical and social context on evaluations of captive, intensive service relationships," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2004), pp. 443-445; R.J. Kwortnik, "Shipscape influence on the leisure cruise experience," *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2008), pp. 289-311; and A. Pantouvakis, "The relative importance of service features in explaining customer satisfaction: A comparison of measurement models," *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2010), pp. 366-387.

[3] Kwortnik, *op.cit*.

EXHIBIT 1

## Studies on context and service

| | Authors | Context | Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Robson, S., Kimes, S.E., Becker, F.D. and Evans, G.W., 2011. | Restaurants | Environment has an effect on diners; spatial intrusion leads to early departure or disinclination to spend. |
| 2 | Pantouvakis, A., 2010. | Cruise: Nordic travelers | SERVQUAL fails to fully capture intangibles; a new "servicescape" model is proposed and tested for measuring environmental attributes. |
| 3 | Lin, I.Y., 2010. | Hotel bars and hotels guest rooms | As individuals' arousal seeking increases, both arousal and pleasure scores increase in bar and guest room settings. |
| 4 | Vilnai-Yavetz, I., Gilboa, S., 2010. | The impact of clean context on customers' responses | Approach behavior is influenced by servicescape cleanliness; positive relationship between cleanliness and pleasure, trust. |
| 5 | Lio, H., Rody, R., 2009. | Casino | Casino operators benefit from designing facilities that can make a customer feel satisfied, excited, and in control. |
| 6 | Reynolds, K., Harris, L., 2009. | Customers' misbehavior | Disaffection with service and servicescape variables is significantly associated with dysfunctional customer acts. |
| 7 | Rosenbaum, M.S., 2009. | Servicescape's restorative potential | Servicescapes can mimic the properties found in nature. Thus, the health potential of public places may be profound. |
| 8 | Kwortnik, R.J., 2008. | Cruise ships | Shipscape variables (e.g., layout, size, décor) influence cruisers' pleasure and perception of overall cruise experience. |
| 9 | Venkatraman, M., Nelson, T. (2008). | Starbucks in China | The physical environment influences consumerism; customers transform Starbucks into a consumptionscape through experiences & role identities. |
| 10 | Athanasopoulou. P., 2008. | Fitness centers | Relationship quality can be increased by selecting and training employees and managing the servicescape. |
| 11 | Ebru Ayas, E., Eklund, J., Ishihara, S., 2008. | Waiting areas in medical settings | Design suggestions for understanding affective needs in servicescapes; most respondents seek a "calm" environment. |
| 12 | Lin, B., Leu, W., Breen, G., Lin, W., 2008. | Hospital pharmacies | Effect of environment on pharmacists' work outcomes. Favorable perceptions are positively related to job satisfaction. |
| 13 | Skinner, H., Kubacki, K., Parfitt, S., Moss, G., 2008. | Nightclubs and bars | Polish club-goers influenced by elements of the servicescape; respondents preferred communal seating, central dance floor, safety indicators. |
| 14 | Harris, L.C., Ezeh, C., 2008. | Restaurant | Organizational climate and culture in a restaurant can be manipulated to positively affect customers' loyalty intentions. |
| 15 | Parish, J., Berry, L., Lam, S., 2008. | Hospital | Elements of the servicescape (pleasantness, convenience, safety) affect service workers' job stress and job satisfaction. |
| 16 | Oakes, S., North. A.C., 2008. | Impact of music on service | Consumer response to music influenced by environmental variables; spending increases with positive perceptions. |
| 17 | Keillor. B.D., Lewison, D., Hult, G.T.M., Hauser, W., 2007. | Impact of servicescape in different countries | Relationship between service quality and purchase intentions in developed markets but not in developing markets. |
| 18 | Rosenbaum, M.S., Montoya, D.Y., 2007. | Place identity | Consumers' responses influenced by place identity. Assess place by evaluating others' ethnicity and nonverbal cues. |
| 19 | Griffiths, M., 2007. | Territoriality of consumers in service environments | Consumers' territorial actions are potentially significant detractors to service. Trend for organizations to create "third places." |
| 20 | Newman, A.J., 2007. | How service environments affect customers' mood and affect | Servicescapes are important quality differentiators; companies can manage elements in the environment, such as clutter, to create a positive effect. |

**EXHIBIT 2**

**Elements of the service environment that affect employees and passengers**

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        ┌────────────────────────────────────┐
        │   Elements of Physical Context     │
        └────────────────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐  Service   ┌────────────┐
│    Managers      │    │   Service    │ Experience │ Passengers │
│ Identify & Modify│    │  Employees   │ ◄────────► │            │
│  Elements of the │    │              │            │            │
│Service Environment│   └──────────────┘            └────────────┘
└──────────────────┘

        ┌────────────────────────────────────┐
        │    Elements of Social Context      │
        └────────────────────────────────────┘
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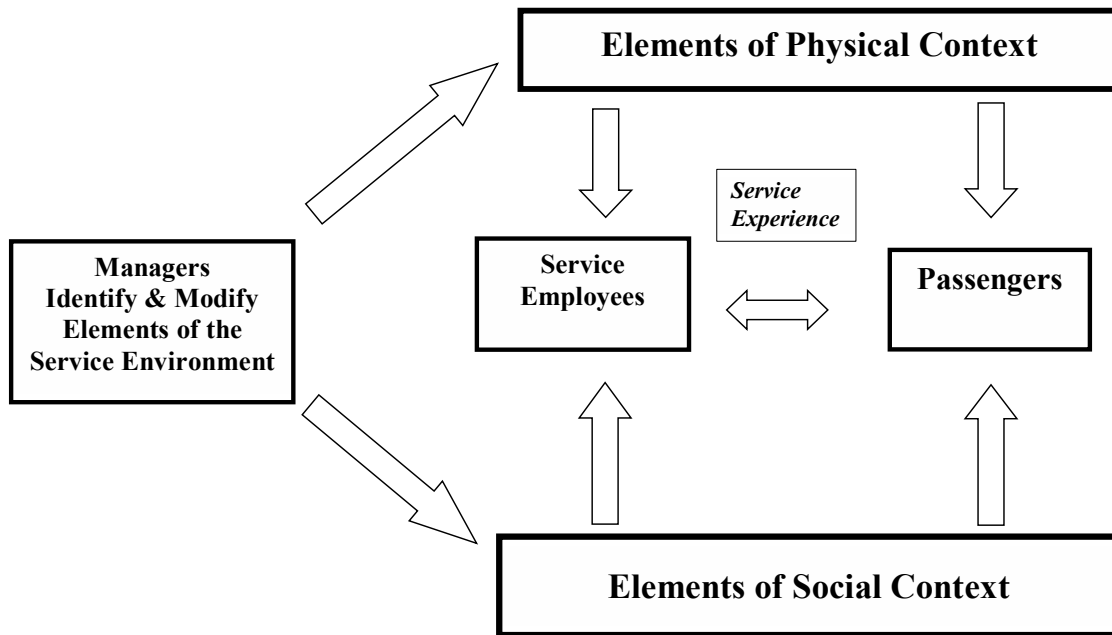
The conceptual tool described here presents a framework for anticipating the types of service relationships that are likely to develop based on key dimensions of the cruise ship service context. As Bitner and others have long argued, customers have significant impact on service outcomes. Nowhere is this more apparent than on board a ship, where passengers and service employees interact over an extended period of time in a distinctive and constrained environment.[4] A literature review supported by observations and convenience interviews suggests four distinct roles that passengers play in their on-board service relationships: expert, manager, best friend, and teammate. Examining these relationships provides insights into the nature of passengers' service experience and offers guidance to managers as they seek to enhance customer perceptions of quality and value. Let's start by reviewing other research related to the importance of context.

## The Influence of Context on Customer Service Experiences

**The physical environment**. An early approach to studying an organization's physical environment was developed by Kotler,[5]

who used the term "atmospherics" to suggest that the physical characteristics of a workplace—such as design, color, lighting, and other features—were important but often neglected dimensions that affected interactions. Later studies confirmed and augmented Kotler's findings, which support the belief that the service context matters.[6]

Bitner's research highlighted elements of context that are particularly important in facilitating or hindering service encounters. She found that seating arrangements, lighting, and other variables define the possibilities and limitations of a guest's social interactions. Exhibit 1 lists several studies related to the effects of the service context on the customer experience.

The physical environment, as one might expect, has a particularly strong influence on service employees and customers who spend large amounts of time in a particular setting.[7] Guests, for instance, can be encouraged to linger, explore, and affiliate according to physical elements of their

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[4] M.J. Bitner, W.T. Faranda, A.R. Hubbert, and V.A. Zeithaml, "Customer contributions and roles in service delivery," *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1997), pp. 193-205; and R. Ek, J. Larsen, S. Hornskov, and O. Mansfeldt, "A dynamic framework of tourist experiences: Space-time and performances in the experience economy," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality & Tourism*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2008), pp. 122-140.

[5] P. Kotler, "Atmospherics as a marketing tool," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Winter 1973), pp. 48-64.

[6] Conlon *et al., op.cit.*; R, Moore, M.L. Moore, and M. Capella, "The impact of customer-to-customer interactions in a high personal contact service setting," *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 19, No. 6-7 (2005), pp. 482-491; and J. Parish, L. Berry, and S. Lam, "The effect of the servicescape on service workers," *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2008), pp. 220-238.

[7] G. Bonnin, "Physical environment and service experience: An appropriation-based model," *Journal of Services Research*, Vol. 6 (2006), pp. 45-64.

environment.[8] This affects not only the nature and quality of the service experience but also such variables as the duration of the service encounter.

**The social environment.** In addition to the physical environment, characteristics of the participants themselves also influence the service encounter. As part of the social environment, customers co-create the service experience and therefore significantly influence that experience. Customers' perceptions of value are affected by their personality, goals, expectations, product knowledge, cultural background, mood, and other factors.[9] Variables such as age, gender,[10] and product knowledge and involvement also influence service dynamics.[11] These factors are particularly salient for the design of service environments, since a service approach that might be optimal for one individual is not necessarily ideal for another.

It is apparent that the dynamics of the service exchange, which is influenced by the context in which it occurs, are key to determining perceived value in any service environment.[12] Focusing on both the physical and social environment provides managers with a useful approach that reveals new opportunities and supports strategies to enhance passengers' perceptions of service quality (as depicted in Exhibit 2). In this report, I examine how this works on board a cruise ship.

## Exploring Context at Sea: The ShipScape

The physical and social context in which on-board service is delivered affects how passengers define their roles, establish expectations for their interactions, and behave in the service encounter.[13] Next I describe the key physical and social features that distinguish the ShipScape.

## The Physical ShipScape

The essence of a cruise is that the ship becomes its own world, [14] or what Goffman referred to as a total institution.[15] Two dimensions of service context are particularly relevant to cruise settings: **(1)** the level of captivity, or the difficulty a passenger has leaving the service environment, and **(2)** the level of immersion, or the length of time passengers and cruise employees spend together.[16] The daily activities of a large number of people take place in a restricted space for an appreciable period of time during a cruise, and those activities are heavily influenced by the ship's physical design and services.

Employees work and live in the same physical space for an extended period of time. When under contract, they work seven days a week, often twelve or more hours a day. Distinctions between public and private, work and recreation, and day and night become blurred. Their duties require them to be "on the job" whenever they are in a public area. When not performing their service role, they become invisible as they descend into the lower floors of the ship for their meals, lodging, and recreation.

Regardless of the specific shipboard ambience, the constraints of the cruise ship experience mean that passengers are in continual contact with one another, notably in public spaces, such as elevators, dining rooms, lounges, and outdoor recreation areas. The nature of one passenger's behavior therefore affects the quality of the experience for fellow cruisers.

## The Social ShipScape

Gutek and her colleagues (1999) distinguish between two types of interaction: an "encounter," which may involve a single exchange, and a "relationship," in which there is repeated contact and interaction. Cruise ships facilitate multidimensional relationships that evolve over the course of a cruise. The extensive personal contact with passengers brings with it the expectation that cruise employees will provide what Hochschild termed "emotional labor."[17] While service employees' affective displays are always carefully managed, the immersion of the cruise environment magnifies this dimension.

[8] M.J. Bitner, B.H. Booms, and L.A. Mohr, "Critical service encounters: The employee's view," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (1994), pp. 95–106.

[9] C. Ganesan-Lim, R. Russell-Bennett, and T. Dagger, "The impact of service contact type and demographic characteristics on service quality perceptions," *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 22, No. 7 (2008), pp. 550-561.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] K. Hung and J.F. Petrick, "The role of self- and functional congruity in cruising intentions," *Journal of Travel Research* (2010), pp. 1-13 (forthcoming).

[12] C. Gentile, N. Spiller, and G. Noci, "How to sustain the customer experience: An overview of experience components that co-create value with the customer," *European Management Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2007), pp. 395-410; C.K. Prahalad and V. Ramaswamy, "Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation," *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2004), pp. 5-14; and J. Larsen and J. Meged, "Tourists co-producing guided tours," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2013), pp. 88-102.

[13] Kwortnik, *op.cit.*

[14] H. Becker, "The politics of presentation: Goffman and total institutions," *Symbolic Interaction,* Vol. 26, No. 4 (2003), pp. 659-669; S.R. Clegg, "Why is organizational theory so ignorant? The neglect of total institutions," *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2006), pp. 426-430; and S. Tracy, "Becoming a character for commerce," *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2000), pp. 90-128.

[15] E. Goffman, *Asylums* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1961).

[16] Conlon, et *al., op.cit.*

[17] A.R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

EXHIBIT 3

**Physical- and social-context influences on passengers' service relationships**

| Elements of ShipBoard Context | Expert Passenger | Passenger as Manager | Passenger as Best Friend | Passenger as Team Member |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Physical Dimensions of Context** | | | | |
| Design | | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| Color/Lighting | | | ■ | ■ |
| Room size | | | ■ | |
| Seating | | | | ■ |
| Captivity | ■ | | ■ | ■ |
| Immersion | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| | | | | |
| **Social Dimensions of Context** | | | | |
| Goals and Expectations | | ■ | | ■ |
| Product knowledge | ■ | | | ■ |
| Attitudes | ■ | | | ■ |
| Age | | ■ | ■ | |
| Emotional Involvement | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ |
| Emotional Labor | | ■ | ■ | |
| Motivation | ■ | | ■ | ■ |
| Workforce demographics | | ■ | ■ | |
| Intensity | ■ | ■ | | |
| Stress | | ■ | | |
| Need for Affiliation | | | ■ | ■ |
| Trust | | | ■ | |
| **Manager Challenges and Interventions** | ● Orient customers to align expectations<br>● Increase self-service components<br>● Offer special events; use literature for clarification<br>● Work to structure customer participation | ● Customize services<br>● Design choices into experience<br>● Increase employee assessment measures<br>● Provide resources to reduce employee stress | ● Implement programs for employees to socialize<br>● Provide opportunities for employees to connect with family<br>● Provide resources for support<br>● Review selection criteria<br>● Make professional behavior clear to employees | ● Consider consumer compatibility<br>● Focus on creating perceptions of equity<br>● Use grapevine to ensure accurate information<br>● Keep opinion leaders well informed<br>● Respond quickly to requests for information |

Cruise ship employees are typically diverse, representing a wide range of cultures and backgrounds. On the ship, however, many aspects of their behavior are carefully regimented, and items such as dress, food, and housing are standardized.[18] Employees of different status often receive different privileges. Within such a system, ordinary rights for the lowest levels of employees—such as calling home, using a computer, or leaving the ship when it is in port—become framed as privileges. The combination of employee diversity and the high need for passenger care often creates additional challenges in managing quality and consistency in the service encounter.[19]

Four distinct passenger role relationships develop in this shipboard context. Managers must anticipate and address the issues raised by each role to ensure high quality service experiences. As I indicated earlier, the roles are the expert passenger, the manager passenger, the best friend passenger, and the team member passenger. Each involves a slightly different relationship with the ship's employees and requires different management strategies.

## Methodology

I developed this typology based on conversations and observations that I made during six cruises on three diferent cruise lines that embark from Florida ports: Norwegian, Princess, and Royal Caribbean. These conversations were held with fellow passengers, service employees, and department managers. The ships accommodated between 2,400 and 3,800 passengers, and sailed Caribbean itineraries of between 7 and 11 days.

## ShipScape and The Roles Passengers Play

These four role relationships that I identified, influenced by the physical and social shipboard environment, provide a framework for understanding how passengers perceive service quality during interactions with employees and fellow passengers.[20] Managers can then use this framework as a tool for anticipating the challenges that emerge in each relationship and identifying strategies to enhance these encounters to improve service delivery (Exhibit 3).

## The Expert Passenger

Throughout the hospitality industry, customers are involved in creating their own service experiences. Over time, customers may become "experts," who contribute suggestions, supply knowledge, and provide labor as they participate in producing the service they receive.[21] On board ship, service intensity and captivity magnify the passenger's role in this regard.[22] Repeat cruisers, in particular, perceive themselves as having high levels of competence due to their past on-board experiences. They are likely to have a high level of self-efficacy and attitudes of entitlement regarding all aspects of the cruise experience, including participation in life boat drills, navigating tender lines, and recommending specific staterooms and dining choices.

Far from reducing employees' workload, expert passengers often increase employees' emotional burden, creating task variety and increasing task difficulty.[23] Passengers who behave as if they were experts are likely to constrain efficiency, disrupt routines, and fail to comply with procedures. This uncertainty and lack of task clarity creates even more stress for cruise staff who are responsible not only for passenger satisfaction but also for passenger safety. Ford and Heaton propose that customers contribute to the value chain only if they have **(1)** task clarity, **(2)** the required competence, and **(3)** appropriate motivation.[24] This is not always the case with expert cruisers, because they frequently participate in the service experience in random and idiosyncratic ways. In those instances, their behavior is more likely to inhibit than facilitate a satisfying service encounter.

When considering passenger competence, cruisers' input into the service experience can be either functional (how the customer behaves) or technical (what the customer provides). When passengers have low functional competence they may reduce the impact of service employees' efforts and

[18] J.A. Encandela, "Danger at sea: Social hierarchy and social solidarity," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1991), pp. 131-156; and J.P. Forgas, *Social Episodes: The Study of Interaction Routines* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

[19] M. Testa, "Organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and effort in the service environment," *Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 135 No. 2 (2001), pp. 226-236; and M. Testa, "Cultural similarity and service leadership: A look at the cruise industry," *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (2004), pp. 402-413.

[20] S.L. Vargo and R.F. Lusch, "Service-dominant logic: Continuing the evolution," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Sciences*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2008), pp. 1-10.

[21] N. Bendapudi and R.P. Leone, "Psychological implications of customer participation on co-production," *Journal of Marketing,* Vol. 67, No. 1 (2003), pp. 14-28; and K. Namasivayam, "The consumer as 'transient employee': Consumer satisfaction through the lens of job-performance models," *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 14, No. 3-4 (2003), pp. 420-435.

[22] J. Petrick, "First timers' and repeaters' perceived value," *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2004), pp. 29-38.

[23] A. Hsieh, C. Yen, and K. Chin, "Participative customers as partial employees and service provider workload," *International Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2004), pp. 187-199; and H.T. Keh and C.W. Teo, "Retail customers as partial employees in service provision: A conceptual framework," *International Journal of Retail & Distribution*, Vol. 19, No. 8-9 (2001), pp. 370-378.

[24] R.C. Ford and C.P. Heaton, "Managing your guest as a quasi-employee," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2001), pp. 46-55.

increase their workload.[25] A classic example is passengers who fail to comply with lifeboat drills because they have "heard it all before." Such an attitude presents a challenge for cruise staff who are charged with passenger safety. In this connection, one experienced passenger told me: "I've been on more cruises than any employee on board; no one should have to spend half the day in the hot sun listening to a drill sergeant. As soon as my stateroom number is called, I head back inside and take anyone else with me who will come."

On the other hand, there are numerous ways in which cruise lines expect passengers to be experts. For instance, cruisers are assumed to have the technical competence required to print out their boarding passes and baggage tags. Failure to perform these tasks stalls lines and increases the wait time for others. Once on board, lack of technical knowledge results in misunderstandings which affect the cruise experience. For example, some cruisers don't realize that those margaritas that are offered as passengers embark are not complimentary. Moreover, passengers who weren't aware of the expectations for daily tipping are also surprised and not pleased to discover additional charges on their account.

## Management Strategies

Cruise lines need to orient and socialize all passengers, but must pay special attention to their expert cruisers. Doing so provides a means of better aligning passenger expectations and behavior with the service employees' goals and increasing the likelihood that passengers will behave in ways that facilitate a positive service encounter. In fact, some researchers suggest that cruise lines might seek opportunities for passengers to increase the self-service components of their experience.[26] Such overall involvement increases customer control, further individualizes the service encounter, and adds perceived value to the experience. In addition, when customers actively participate in service delivery they are more likely to share the blame when something goes wrong.[27] To make this happen cruise ship managers can offer formal training programs, distribute organizational literature, provide environmental cues, sponsor experienced-passenger events, and encourage on board observation of other passengers.[28]

## Passenger as Manager

As noted in other studies,[29] passengers sometimes take on the role of manager as they determine service priorities, assess the effectiveness of employee efforts, and "reward" the service provider with tips and high satisfaction ratings.[30] "I don't consider myself difficult," one passenger explained to me. "It's just that I know exactly what I want and if my steward expects to be tipped, she knows what she needs to do to make sure I'm satisfied."

Due to both the higher immersion and intensity of the shipboard experience, cruisers shape employees' perceptions of task characteristics and demands and therefore affect the nature of the jobs performed.[31] In part, this occurs because service employees are often much closer to passengers than to their managers, both physically and psychologically. As employees switch from ship to ship, they many not have an opportunity to establish a strong relationship with one manager. Daily contact with passengers over the course of even a relatively brief cruise, on the other hand, creates an environment in which employees are sensitive to customers' expectations for the services they deliver.

Many passengers recognize their power to set service expectations. This situation, however, often serves only to increase employees' stress when the passengers' demands contradict management or corporate policies.[32] Discrepancies often exist among the priorities and requirements of these multiple masters. While passengers want highly personalized service, management may not support special requests and company policy may clearly prohibit the desired activity. The strong bond that develops between service provider and passenger, however, exerts pressure for staff members to comply with even the most extreme requests. This situation has the potential to create role conflict, an increase in workload, and perceptions of inequity among passengers.[33]

[25] S.W. Kelley, J.H. Donnelly, and S.J. Skinner, "Customer participation in service production and delivery," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (1990), pp. 315-335; and R. Larsson and D.E. Bowen, "Organization and customer: Managing design and coordination of services," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 21 No. 3 (1989), pp. 791-825.

[26] Vargo and Lusch, *op.cit*.

[27] M.J. Bitner, "Evaluating service encounters: the effects of physical surroundings and employee responses," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (1990), pp. 69-82.

[28] Kelley *et al., op.cit*.

[29] Ford and Heaton, *op.cit*.; A. Hsieh, C. Yen, and K. Chin, "Participative customers as partial employees and service provider workload," *International Journal of Service Managem*ent, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2004), pp. 187-199.

[30] P. Maas and A. Graf, "Leadership by customers? New roles of service companies' customers," *German Journal of Human Resource Research*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2004), pp. 329-345; and Tracy, *op.cit*.

[31] D.E. Bowen, "Managing customers as human resources in service organizations," *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1986), pp. 371-383; and Prahalad and Ramaswamy, *op.cit*.

[32] A. Hsieh and C. Yen, "The effect of customer participation on service providers' job stress," *Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 7 (2005), pp. 891-919.

[33] B.G. Chung and B. Schneider, "Serving multiple masters: Role conflict experienced by service employees," *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2002), pp. 70-87.

## Management Strategies

The impact of cruisers' influence on employee behaviors can be reduced by deliberately designing planned choices and by working to customize the service experience. By anticipating passengers' need to influence the nature and delivery of the service, managers can create opportunities for cruisers to participate with minimum disruption.[34] Balancing passenger feedback with other assessment measures may also reduce the anxiety employees feel about pleasing passengers at all costs. Managers cannot afford to relinquish their supervisory role, and they must creatively address the issues for service employees who experience the conflicting expectations and uncertain consequences generated by passengers who seek to manage the service exchange.

## Passenger as Best Friend

Many cruisers develop an emotional attachment to one or more service employees that is rarely experienced in other service settings.[35] Even though passengers and employees inhabit different social worlds, the duration and frequency of contact and the shared experience of the cruise facilitates the development of particularly strong relationships.[36] A purser, for instance, told me about a situation in which a passenger demanded to know the next time that a particular server would be scheduled to work again on that ship so that she could arrange her next cruise at a time when the employee would be on board.

Price, Arnould, and Tierney define friendship as a voluntary, personal relationship in which both parties increasingly engage in self-disclosure.[37] Passengers often take a special interest in the cruise staff, asking about their families, about how they cope with months at sea, and about the country that appears on their name tags.[38] Often surprised and shocked to discover how difficult life is on a ship, cruisers become personally involved and develop close relationships with servers, housekeepers, and others with whom they frequently interact. For their part, employees, far from family and friends, may find it easy to confide in passengers who take an active interest in them. As cruise ships may be characterized as exhibiting low "organizational care," there is a tendency for employees to look to passengers for empathy and support.[39] Reciprocity then motivates passengers to reveal personal information to the service provider.[40]

For many service employees, strong passenger friendships give meaning to their work. Employees become willing to offer services that extend beyond the basic requirements of their job.[41] The strength of passengers' relationships also results in a higher tolerance for service failures.[42] In some cases, the interpersonal loyalty that develops between the passenger and employee can be more influential than any loyalty the employee has to either a manager or the company's brand. Passengers' repeated contact with the same service provider creates a bond that even changes the way they refer to the individual. Staff members become "my server," "my steward," or "my hairdresser."[43]

Problems arise when the level of disclosure is not reciprocal. Perceptions that either party may be sustaining a friendship for personal gain potentially damages the relationship. While the nature of the cruise experience encourages familiarity, some participants perceive the deliberate attempt to build friendships (by either party) as manipulative. The personal toll of providing pleasure as a job requirement cannot be underestimated.[44] An individual's well-being is at risk when there is a discrepancy between the emotion that is expected and what is experienced.[45] Yet, the ability to manage one's feelings and present a positive image to customers—

[34] J. Bateson, "Perceived control and the service experience," in *Handbook of Services Marketing and Management*, ed. T.A. Swartz and D. Iacobucci (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), pp. 127-144.

[35] Kwortnik, *op.cit.*

[36] L.L. Berry, "Relationship marketing of services—growing interest, emerging perspectives," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1995), pp. 236-245; O. Hansemark and M. Albinsson, "Customer satisfaction and retention: The experiences of individual employees," *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 14 No. 1 (2004), pp. 40-57; H. Hansen, K.Sandvik, and F. Selnes, "Direct and indirect effects of commitment to a service employee on the intention to stay," *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2003), pp. 356-368.

[37] L.L. Price, E.J. Arnould, and P. Tierney, "Going to extremes: managing service encounters and assessing provider performance," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (1999), pp. 83-97.

[38] H. Hansen, "Antecedents to consumers' disclosing intimacy with service employees," *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 17, No. 6-7 (2003), pp. 573-586; and K. Lerum, "Sexuality, power, and camaraderie in service work," *Gender & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 6 (2004), pp. 756-776.

[39] D.J. McAllister and G.A. Bigley, "Work context and the definition of self: How organizational care influences organization-based self-esteem," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 5 (2002), pp. 894-904.

[40] Hansen, *op.cit.*; and E. Andersson Cederholm and J. Hultman, "The value of intimacy—negotiating commercial relationships in lifestyle entrepreneurship," *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2010), pp. 16-32.

[41] K. Erickson, "To invest or detach? Coping strategies and workplace culture in service work," *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2004), pp. 549-572; and E. Sharpe, "Going above and beyond: The emotional labor of adventure guides," *Journal of Leisure Research*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2005), pp. 29-50.

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[43] B.A. Gutek, A.D. Bhappu, M.A. Liao-Troth, and B. Cherry, "Distinguishing between service relationships and service encounters," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (1999), pp. 218-233.

[44] S. Wearing and B. Wearing, "Conceptualizing the selves of tourism," *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2001), pp. 143-159.

[45] B.E. Ashforth and R. Humphrey, "Emotional labor in service roles: The influence of identity," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1993), pp. 88-115; and D. Rousseau and Y. Fried, "Location, location,

whatever it takes—is one of the defining characteristics of the competent employee in nearly all service settings.[46]

## Management Strategies

Managers must be aware of the potential risks inherent in friendship-type relationships—particularly when they are imbalanced.[47] While some aspects of a friendship benefit all parties, managers can reduce the likelihood of any downside by identifying additional avenues to address the strong need for affiliation that arises at sea. This can be accomplished by providing organizational support and finding ways to build community on board. As always, the selection of cruise employees who are likely to embrace investment strategies contributes to both passenger and staff satisfaction.

Management can also find ways to fill employees' emotional void by encouraging them to create bonds with each other, rather than rely on passenger relationships. From employee lounges to culture-specific culinary exchanges, the months employees spend together can be enhanced through planned interactions. The ready availability of communication technologies that enable employees to maintain contact with family and friends also helps fill employees' need for affiliation.

## Passenger as Team Member

Cruisers also form relationships with each other as a result of their shared experiences, a situation fostered by the ship's physical design. [48] Beyond cruise ship design, the social environment—the personal characteristics and needs of those involved—influences the extent to which passengers bond with each other. On-board interactions blend passengers' backgrounds as they build community through the shared onboard experience.[49]

This team dimension can affect guests' satisfaction with service, for good or ill. One benefit of "customer teams" is that conversations among strangers may increase passenger satisfaction by reducing anxiety and fulfilling a need for

social interaction. This, in turn, can raise passengers' level of tolerance for shortcomings in service delivery.[50] Several studies have concluded that passengers are more likely to influence each other when they have high levels of motivation and interest, and that these interactions add value to the cruise experience.[51]

The meanings associated with a particular setting, like a cruise ship, emerge from the interactions that occur between those who share the travel experience.[52] Even the frequency of consumption behavior—whether drinks, excursions, gambling, or desserts—increases with more frequent passenger-to-passenger contact, influenced by dynamics of the social environment and facilitated or constrained by the physical environment.

Passenger teams can be regarded either as proactive helpers, that is, expert cruisers who display their considerable knowledge, or as reactive participants who have little specific expertise but who readily volunteer information and opinions to fellow cruisers. Cruisers are able to establish a substantial power base due to the confined shipboard environment. They can quickly collaborate, exchange information, and organize themselves to accomplish tasks.[53] In fact, passengers need not interact directly to influence the service experience. Cruisers become part of each other's visual and psychological space—the mere presence of other passengers affects the ShipScape.[54]

In their function of reducing (or increasing) anxiety, passenger teams often address breakdowns in service delivery. As explained by the team member role, passengers are subject to "emotional contagion," or the flow of emotions from one person to another.[55] One manager described the chaos that resulted when the captain cancelled the tender to a main port of call due to weather conditions. Rather than understanding the captain's concern for their safety, passen-

location: Contextualizing organizational research," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2001), pp. 1-10.

[46] G. Anderson, "Emotions and work in a lifestyle occupation," *Journal of European Industrial Training*, Vol. 17, No. 5 (1993), pp. 10-14.

[47] J. Bailey, D. Gremler, and M. McCollough, "Service encounter emotional value: The dyadic influence of customer and employee emotions," *Services Marketing Quarterly,* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2001), pp. 1-25; and P. Guenzi and O. Pelloni, "The impact of interpersonal relationships on customer satisfaction and loyalty to the service provider," *International Journal of Service Industry Management,* Vol. 15, No. 4 (2004), pp. 365-384.

[48] B. Trauer and C. Ryan, "Destination image, romance and place experience—an application of intimacy theory in tourism," *Tourism Management*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2005), pp. 481-491.

[49] K. Harris and S. Baron, "Consumer-to-consumer conversations in service settings." *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2004), pp. 287-303.

[50] A.R. Rodie and S.S. Kleine, "Customer participation in services production and delivery," in *Handbook of Services Marketing and Management,* ed. T.A. Swartz and D. Iacobucci (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 2000), pp. 111-125.

[51] R. Bagozzi, "On the concept of intentional social action in consumer behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (2000), pp. 388-396; M.E. Havitz and F. Dimanche, "Leisure involvement revisited: Drive properties and paradoxes," *Journal of Leisure Research*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1999), pp. 122-149; and P.C. Verhoef, K. Lemon, A. Parasuraman, A. Roggeveen, M. Tsiros, and L. Schlesinger, "Customer experience creation: Determinants, dynamics and management strategies," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (2009), pp. 31-41.

[52] Trauer and Ryan, *op.cit*.

[53] Maas and Graf, *op.cit*.

[54] Kwortnik, *op.cit.*

[55] G. Schoenewolf, "Emotional contagion: Behavior induction in individuals and groups," *Modern Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1990), pp. 49-61; and W. Tsai and and Y. Huang, "Mechanisms linking employee affective delivery and customer behavioral intentions," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 87, No. 5 (2002), pp. 1001-1008.

gers' emotions around this disappointment escalated as they interacted in public spaces. In other situations, perceptions of inequity have led passengers to join together and demand concessions from management.

In the team context, one passenger's behavior can either enhance or spoil the service experience for many others.[56] For instance, a passenger who enthusiastically participates in cruise activities and encourages others to do so enlivens everyone's experience. On the other hand, one who constantly demands attention becomes an unwelcome distraction and makes it difficult for others who may also need assistance. Several F&B managers described their experience with disruptive cruisers who, dining with a number of fellow passengers, loudly complain about food quality and continuously send items back to the kitchen.

## Management Strategies

As we discussed, within the physical cruise context passengers' close proximity creates a "virtual team" and heightens the impact of one person's conduct on fellow cruisers. To ensure that this dynamic improves the service experience, one strategy suggested by researchers is to foster favorable passenger-to-passenger interactions and cultivate exchanges that add value to the cruise experience.[57] Managers can facilitate a positive team spirit and instill a sense of shared responsibility for creating a positive service environment. In a closed system such as the cruise ship environment, perceptions of equity are vital, particularly in terms of information sharing. Thus, by constantly putting accurate and positive information into the informal networks, managers can acknowledge the importance of passengers' participation. Then, by monitoring passengers' responses, managers can facilitate passenger exchanges that enhance, rather than detract from, the cruise experience.

Through planned activities and passenger profiles, managers can also foster what researchers call customer compatibility. That is, efforts can be made to deliberately bring together cruisers who have similar interests and expectations.[58] Identifying specific passengers who serve as opinion leaders and keeping them well informed also contributes

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[56] A. Patterson and S. Baron, "Deviant employees and dreadful service encounters: Customer discord and distrust," *Journal of Service Marketing*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (2010), pp. 438-445; B. Schneider and D.E. Bowen, "Understanding customer delight and outrage," *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1999), pp. 35-45; and M.A. McGrath and C. Otnes, "Unacquainted influencers: When strangers interact in the retail setting," *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1995), pp. 261-272.

[57] J. Finsterwalder and S. Tuzovic, "Quality in group service encounters: A theoretical exploration of the concept of a simultaneous multi-customer co-creation process," *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 20, No 2 (2010), pp. 102-119.

[58] C. Martin and C. Pranter, "Compatibility management: Roles in service performers," *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1991), pp. 43-55.; and Verhoef *et al.*, *op.cit.*

## Impact of context on service relationships in the service delivery improvement cycle
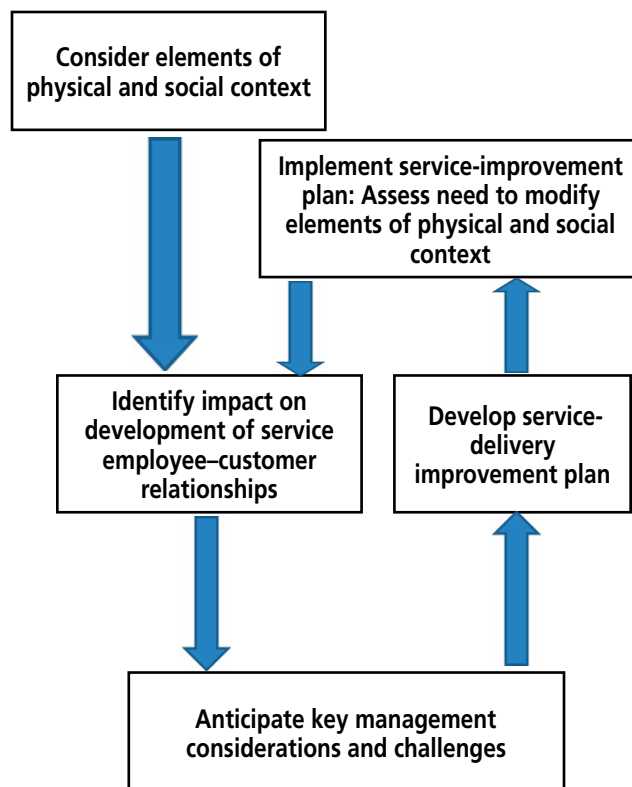


to a positive cruise environment. Responding to passengers' need for information in an open, creative, and timely manner facilitates higher levels of satisfaction with the onboard service experience.

## Future Research on Passenger Roles

The cruise ship environment provides a rich context for examining service dynamics. Future research can further investigate the four role relationships presented here and explore questions regarding how elements of the physical and social context influence service dynamics (Exhibit 4).

While this paper is based on limited observations and a convenience sample, the framework suggests direction for both researchers and management practitioners to better understand how relationships among guests and employees aboard a cruise ship shape the service experience. The following sample questions suggest possible themes:

## Customer as Expert

- How does the amount of time spent in the service environment affect the degree to which customers serve as an expert cruiser?

- How do customers as expert employees affect service providers' self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and other work-related dimensions?

- How are perceptions of value influenced by the degree of knowledge (both functional and technical) customers have about the property or company?

- How can companies best train customers to collaborate in service delivery and reward them for effective participation?

## Customer as Manager

- How do the degree of captivity and immersion affect the development of the customer-as-manager relationship in service environments?

- How might customer perceptions of choice and control (and therefore value) be increased?

- What effect does passenger-as-manager have on employee stress and well-being? How are these consequences moderated by employees' personal characteristics?

## Customer as Friend

- What employee or customer characteristics influence the development of passenger-as-friend?

- How does the perceived degree of "organizational care" influence the development of customer and employee relationships?

- How do imbalanced levels of trust affect customers' perceptions of the service experience?

## Customer as Team Member

- How do customers who travel in groups—such as families, friends, and coworkers—create value for themselves in a service environment?

- How can customer-to-customer interactions be fostered for the purpose of enhancing the service experience? What risks are involved?

- How can compatibility management facilitate positive customer experiences?

The role customers play in creating quality cannot be overlooked. The cruise environment provides a multi-faceted and largely unexplored context in which the dynamics of service delivery can be observed, studied, and subsequently applied to a range of service contexts.

## Conclusion

As service organizations increasingly focus on the customer experience, the cruise industry is well-positioned to serve as a model for exploring the impact of the physical and social context on service dynamics and the role relationships that develop. Like the guests of land-based operations, cruise line passengers seek experiences which enable them to have an active and recognized part in the delivery process. Although the four role relationships described in this paper may be idiosyncratic to the shipboard environment, similar dynamics can be observed in other service situations. Identifying customer–service employee relationships can assist managers in anticipating challenges and in identifying elements of context that can be managed to improve the service experience. ■

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