

Too Sad? Too Happy? Salesperson Emotions Affect Buyer Behavior During and After Sale

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There's nothing like getting great customer service. A salesperson who shows you the kind of product you want, tells you about the different options without pressuring you into the most expensive ones or gives you a good deal can have you leaving the store with a new bounce in your step. At the very least, customer-service personnel are expected to do their jobs with a smile and try their best to accommodate reasonable customer requests.

What happens when salespeople go overboard with their customer service? Can over-the-top displays of emotion turn customers off as much as being rude or unhelpful? Can 'service with a smile' go too far?

Researchers from the University of Haifa in Israel and The Open University of Israel, as well as the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, conducted a series of studies to examine the 'emotional intensity' of customer service interactions. In a newly published report, they conclude that customers interpret intense displays of both happy and sad emotions as inappropriate and inauthentic in a sales context. This perception leads customers to decrease their trust of the salesperson and decreases their satisfaction with customer service, expected satisfaction with the product, and actual use of the product.

This research shows the importance of nuance in sales training, since erring on the side of being too happy resulted in worse outcomes than neutral or moderately sad displays, and because sad displays weren't consistently worse than happy ones.

In 2009, one of the paper's authors, Gerben A. Van Kleef proposed a system for thinking about and studying emotions, the Emotions as Social Information (EASI) Model. In a report published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Van Kleef writes that emotional displays can change the observer's behavior through inferential processes, or inferences made from emotions. If your boss calls you into her office with a scowl on her face, you might assume that you are in trouble. If the same boss calls you in with a smile, you anticipate some praise.

In the case of sales transactions, the inferences that customers make appear to be a little more granular. They're inferring trustworthiness, and that inference affects many aspects of the sale.

Researchers from Van Kleef and others point to appropriate and inappropriate emotional displays in sales and other contexts. Van Kleef's 2009 paper explores the concept of *display rules*, the informal rules dictating which emotional displays are appropriate in which contexts. While intense sadness is taboo for a salesperson trying to sell you a phone, it might fit in well at a funeral or during a conversation with a close friend.

In the new study, the researchers used video, voice recordings, and text to simulate customer service experiences with people who had agreed to take part in a psychological study online and in a lab setting. The hypothetical interactions included either an intensely sad display from the salesperson, a mildly sad display, a neutral display, a mildly happy display, or an intensely happy display. After finishing the interaction, participants were asked how they felt about the experience. They rated the salesperson's appropriateness and authenticity, trustworthiness, their satisfaction with the transaction, and their expected satisfaction with the product.

In a final phase of the study, the researchers took the same principle into the real world, to see if an emotional experience with a salesperson would affect the use of a product, a DVD in this case. They offered participants membership in a movie recommendation service that would send them a free DVD movie if the participants filled out a survey regarding their movie preferences. Before the DVD was sent to the participants, they received a message from "Robin," an apparent representative of the service. The message had language that expressed intense happiness or sadness, mild happiness or sadness, or no emotion. The participants filled out a survey after reading 'Robin's' email, then again 10 days later to determine if they had watched the movie. Their results matched the first experiments, with the added results that those participants who experienced an intense emotional display didn't watch the movie they were recommended and given as often as those who had experienced a mild or neutral reaction.

These studies were carried out in Amsterdam and Israel, providing further support (beyond the use of multiple media, online, lab, and field tests) that this phenomenon is persistent and common.

References

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