Are rude customers more stressful than irate ones?

Implications for how we hire for service

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Turnover in the service industry

Turnover is a concern for all businesses, but companies in service and hospitality face unique challenges in retaining employees. Not only is the cost of recruiting, hiring, and onboarding new employees significant, but turnover disrupts the stability of operations damaging consistency and the quality of both the customer and employee experience.

Serving others can be rewarding, but the often unpredictable emotional demands that frontline service employee manage are a significant driver of turnover. Frontline employees serve everyone from loyal brand ambassadors to those with unique and unexpected needs and preferences. What if determined what customer encounters are most stressful and linked to burnout and turnover? Then we could seek to understand the qualities of people who can thrive even in the toughest of circumstances.

Let's do that. Taking your own experience, which encounters do you believe are most stressful – and linked to turnover?

1. Encounters involving openly **upset and hostile** customers, or
2. Encounters with **impolite or rude** customers, and even those a that are hard to figure out. For example, customers who do not say please or thank you, take cell phone calls or respond to communication in timely manner, or speak in ways that could be perceived as aggressive or accusatory (an example might be a customer who frequently starts sentences with "You…").

The facts are in and researchers find that in those hard to figure out, impolite and rude customers are a bigger cause of stress and turnover than upset and hostile customers.

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Customer incivility

Customer incivility is the term organizational researchers use to describe these lower-intensity rude behaviors which violate norms for mutual respect and courtesy. Incivility is damaging in part because of its ambiguous intent – is the customer's intent to show disrespect? While angry customers are definitely stressful, their clear behavior and emotion makes it easier to name and respond appropriately. Rude encounters are more difficult to interpret and determine how to best serve the customer. What was the intent behind that, "You should…" comment by the customer – was he doubting my ability to do my job?

Slowly over time, incivility can spiral out of control. Employees respond to customers with uncivil behavior of their own (or more frequently fellow employees) creating a spiral of incivility. These spirals can spread to include even more employees, and escalate from rudeness to overtly hostile and aggressive acts such as verbal aggression or theft. These negative spirals are more likely to occur with employees who lack the qualities needed to thrive in a service role, or lack the preparation and resources needed to meet customer expectations.

Building resilient teams

Building teams that thrive in the face of difficult customer encounters is possible by screening for key qualities during the hiring process. One way to measure these qualities is with pre-employment assessments that leverage psychology and data to identify candidates with the potential to meet the expectations of the job. There are three key qualities to consider including in hiring assessments for customer service roles
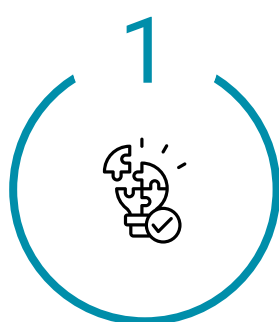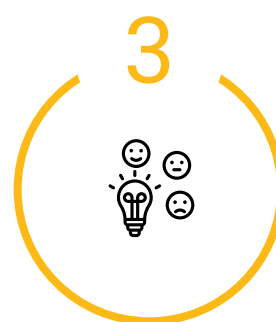
1	2	3
Resilience	Drive for Service	Emotional Intelligence

#1 Resilience

Calvin Coolidge said persistence, "has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race." The ability to recover quickly from a difficult situation, learn from it, and press on is crucial to success in customer service roles. Hiring assessments can help you determine if a candidate shows a productive response to failure. Resilience is linked to feeling in control and taking ownership of reaching a successful outcome. The sample assessment questions below, as part of a large scale measuring accountability, will identify candidates who will learn and grow following difficult customer encounters.

011 I view problems I encounter at work as "personal challenges" I can overcome.

| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

012 When something bad happens at work, I often feel powerless to do anything about it.

| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

#2 Drive for service

Maintaining a positive, "can-do" attitude, showing compassion for others, taking proactive steps to delight customers, and seeking new ways to please customers begins with an internal drive to serve others. Assessments can measure the profiles of candidates and compare them to norms for successful service employees. No single question determines the candidate's result, but on the whole is compared to profiles of people successful in service roles.

001	Cheerful					Strong
	Significantly more	Moderately more	Somewhat more	Somewhat more	Moderately more	Significantly more

002	Delighted					Inspired
	Significantly more	Moderately more	Somewhat more	Somewhat more	Moderately more	Significantly more

Assessments also gauge a candidate's willingness to seek to understand customer needs and how they will respond to difficult customer encounters. The sample item below, as part of a larger assessment, will discontinue candidates who are unlikely to consistently provide experiences that build customer loyalty.

013	Out-of-the-ordinary customer requests cause many problems.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

#3 Emotional intelligence

The ability to understand the feelings and perspective of others is core to customer service. Emotionally intelligent employees use this understanding to guide how they interact with customers and to hopefully gain the desired response from customers. Emotional intelligence not only improves service quality, but also reduces the amount of stress a frontline service employee may experience.

Because ambiguous, rude, or uncivil customer behaviors are prevalent in customer service work, emotional intelligence makes interpreting these interactions easier and the job less stressful. Importantly, assessments can measure not only if candidates will deliver appropriate customer service, but whether they will use an effective strategy.

The sample items below measure how a candidate will deliver the concern and friendly emotional responses required by the situation. As part of a larger test and collection of scenarios it is possible to determine how well a candidate will respond to the stress of the job.

In customer service, successful performance requires showing specific emotions and often requires you to be pleasant and enthusiastic, even when you may not be feeling those emotions. The following looks at actions you use to display appropriate emotions at work.

You have a long line of customers that need attention. It's essential you satisfy each customer's needs as quickly as possible while doing your job well. One customer is angry about a delay in service. She has made negative statements about your company and is almost shouting. You should demonstrate understanding, concern and friendliness.

How likely is it you would use each of the actions below to address the situation?

007   I would think about a time I was in a similar situation to help me effectively express concern and friendliness.

Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Likely	Very Likely

008   I would "put on a mask" to cover my true emotions and "act" concerned and friendly.

Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Likely	Very Likely

009   I would express sincere concern and a true smile.

Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Likely	Very Likely

Next steps

Customer service employees are the faces, hearts, and hands of the organization's brand. Given the large numbers of employees in frontline customer service roles, and the number of customers they influence daily – your hiring process directly affects your ability to build loyal customers.

Rude and impolite customer behavior poses a greater threat to employee retention and performance than angry and irate customers. The ambiguous behavior of a rude customer, whether a tone of voice, or an accusatory statement, can strain employees - leading to poor performance, reduced commitment, and ultimately a decision to leave the organization.

By using pre-employment assessments to measure the potential for resilience, drive for service, and empathy, you can improve the efficiency and accuracy of your hiring process by eliminating people who will struggle to consistently satisfy customers on the job.

However, it doesn't end there. Assessments must be a seamless part of a hiring process that measures all the qualities needed for performance. Are you confident your hiring process is selecting the best candidates? Our eBook, How to Build a Hiring Process, will give you everything you need to know to build a hiring process that is efficient, legally defensible, and most importantly, consistently identifies the best candidates.

Hire a team with a heart for service and hospitality: access your free eBook

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About Corvirtus

Corvirtus provides a range of innovative, science-based measurements and services that tie a company's culture and core values to talent processes. Corvirtus solutions have enabled hundreds of companies to strengthen and scale their corporate cultures, and to identify, develop and retain those employees with the characteristics and capabilities essential for business success and customer satisfaction. For more information, visit www.corvirtus.com or schedule a demo by using this link:

Schedule time for us to connect.