

The Impact of Customer Identity on Politeness in Service Interactions

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Abstract

A widespread rule-of-thumb in marketing says that businesses should ‘treat customers as kings’. While service providers might hope customers would reciprocate their polite demeanor, we know they do not always reciprocate in kind. In this research, we explore how identifying as a customer influences a person’s self-other orientation and impoliteness in service interactions. The first study documents the negative influence of customer identity on other-orientation. In the second study, we demonstrate that subtle priming with customer identity reduces other-focus and in turn decreases politeness. To our knowledge, our research is the first that attempts to explore empirically the relationship between customer identity and politeness. We contribute to theory by demonstrating that customer identity can induce impoliteness beyond contextual factors and personal characteristics. For managers, this research suggests that businesses should refrain from making customer identification salient and rather promote other identities (i.e., partner, guest, or student). Finally, our research encourages future studies to address the current experimental limitations, and to extend our understanding on the relationship between customer identity and dysfunctional behavior.

Keywords: *customer identity; impoliteness; service interaction*

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