

Humor in Service Failure Situations – A double-edged sword?

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Abstract

Humor can release positive effects on people's emotions – but is it beneficial when consumers feel angry because of service failures? Offering economic compensation is expensive. Humor might appease consumers by evoking relief. On the downside, it may be perceived as inappropriate, reinforcing negative responses. Both reactions are possible in the case of service failures, but research has not addressed this topic. We make a twofold contribution to research into humor. First, we explain the psychological mechanisms behind the impact of humor in the context of service failure. The results of two scenario-based experiments show that humor positively influences attitudes toward the service provider via relief and a greater leniency with regard to the failure. Second, we compare humor with a sincere apology and adequate compensation. On average, these methods outperform humor. However, if consumers find the humor very funny, humor improves the situation compared to an apology or compensation.

Keywords: *Humor; Relief-theory; Service-recovery*

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