

# Press information

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*Joint press release of ESMT Berlin and Ruhr University Bochum*

## The customer is not always king

### **The service sector is not without rules. Sometimes the customer must also compromise.**

Service sector workers are often required to enforce certain rules. Researchers in the "International Journal of Research in Marketing" reported how this affects their relationship with customers.

[Prof. Johannes Habel](#) from ESMT Berlin, [Prof. Sascha Alavi](#), formerly at the Université Lausanne in Switzerland, today from Ruhr University Bochum, and [Prof. Doreén Pick](#) from the Merseburg University of Applied Sciences cooperated on the study.

"The concept of the customer as king is a norm that has been held for a long time," said Alavi. "But in the service sector, this is not always the case. As a rule, the customer must be taken by the hand." Everywhere, people rely on the guidance of service personnel, such as security screeners at the airport, fitness trainers, or hotel staff. If a customer disturbs others by being too loud in the hotel, for example, the staff must intervene. Only in this way can a company guarantee a smooth service process in the long term.

### **Self-image threatened**

Many people, however, take offense to the intervention of service staff if it is deemed inappropriate. "Customers who are referred to rules often feel that their self-image is threatened," explained Alavi.

"Although the customer is probably the most important component in the service process, it has not yet been investigated how service employees can implement company rules in order to integrate the customer and provide a satisfactory service," said Habel, explaining the motivation for the study.

The researchers conducted two large-scale field studies, in which they examined customers' reaction to actual enforcement of a service rule. More than 6,800 people participated in the study. They were given descriptions of various scenarios in which service employees interact with customers in a hotel. Participants were expected to imagine themselves in the respective situation and use a questionnaire to indicate how they felt about the employee's behavior.

### **Empathy instead of aggression**

According to the study, it is crucial that service staff explain why they are enforcing a rule. It is also important to the customers that employees express empathy and understanding for their situation and personhood. A raised voice or an aggressive approach will not be well received. "An inexperienced service employee easily commits the mistake of threatening a customer's self-image by enforcing rules in the wrong way," said Alavi. "This must be avoided."

Another conclusion of the study: high-quality service needs rules enforcement. This is because customers who behave correctly express greater customer satisfaction and brand loyalty.

## Original publication

Johannes Habel, Sascha Alavi, Doreén Pick: When serving customers includes correcting them: Understanding the ambivalent effects of enforcing service rules, in: International Journal of Research in Marketing, 2017: DOI: 10.1016/j.ijresmar.2017.09.002

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