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A Service Conundrum: Can Outstanding Service Be Too Good?

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Abstract

Many service operations espouse the need to provide exceptional service. But sometimes good enough is good enough—especially if the alternative is uneven service.

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A Service Conundrum

Can Outstanding Service Be Too Good?

by Kate Walsh

Many service operations espouse the need to provide exceptional service. But sometimes good enough is good enough—especially if the alternative is uneven service.

The transitory nature of service encounters can frustrate both the managers who try to set standards for the transaction and the participants in the encounter. The frustration for managers is that each service transaction is slightly different, depending on the participants. For the participants, the frustration is that each party can bring different expectations to the interaction and, just as important, can carry away different impressions of what just occurred.[1] Even worse, though many managers set a standard of meeting or exceeding customers' expectations, some researchers have found that customers frequently are not clear about what their own service expectations are—and may not know in advance what level of service is acceptable.[2]

Service organizations rely on their customers to provide the initial data (i.e., expectations) that are transformed into service standards, as well as to assist in the service delivery. The diversity and unpredictability of customer demands, combined with the fact that customers are part of the service transaction, are major sources of uncertainty and variability in service

[1] D.E. Bowen, D.E. Schneider, and B. Schneider, "Services Marketing and Management: Implications for Organizational Behavior," in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, ed. B.M. Staw and T.G. Cummings, Vol. 10 (1988), pp. 43–80.

[2] V.A. Zeithmahl, L.L. Berry, and A. Parasuraman, "The Nature and Determinants of Customer Expectations of Service," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 21 (1993), pp. 1–12.

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encounters. Such unpredictability makes it difficult to ensure that an organization provides a consistently satisfactory product.[3]

The burden of determining what the customer wants and attempting to meet that desire falls on a hotel or restaurant's employees. Researchers have identified the basic skills that service providers need to bring to the transaction, but we know little about how service providers conceptualize their roles, approach encounters, and deliver service. Moreover, research about customers' views of a service transaction are often based on data collected well after the fact. This article reports on an exploratory study that sought to assess customers' and providers' views of the same service transaction immediately after it occurred. In so doing, I hoped to identify the characteristics or attributes that foster exemplary service. Specifically, this research considers what makes outstanding service providers want to go beyond providing the minimal and give the customer what Heskett, Sasser, and Hart call "service breakthroughs...where they concentrate on producing services of the highest value to customers."[4] Knowing how service providers approach the encounter and finding out why they offer different levels of service are essential to our understanding of the complexities underlying service transactions.

Service Employees' Role

Service employees are entrusted with considerable responsibility. They are asked to connect with their customers, manage their ser-

vice encounters, and achieve some standard of service excellence—usually relating to customer expectations. Interacting with customers requires employees to invest both emotional and mental forethought and apply a combination of interpersonal skills, sales skills, and self-monitoring skills.[5] Moreover, they are usually expected to do all this with grace, courtesy, and empathy, while at the same time being effective and adaptable.[6]

To help employees manage the complexity of service delivery, organizations either implicitly or explicitly delineate their service standards, and may also enunciate a service vision to guide employees' behavior. Often-cited examples of service visions are Ritz-Carlton's motto of "We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen" and Disney's concept of referring to employees as "cast members."

An organization's service message is meant to guide employees in their service encounters by simplifying procedures and setting the general limits of the encounter. The service message can be difficult to enact, however, because employees are expected to understand the message, subscribe to it, remember it, and always apply it when interacting with customers. Those employees who understand and agree with the message should have a clear vision of their role and therefore be able to offer effective service. Yet most managers do not even know whether their service employees understand their service message, let alone agree with it or apply it.

To find out how service employees conceptualize their service role

Outstanding service providers use different approaches with customers than do those who offer just average or even good service.

[3] D.E. Bowen and T.G. Cummings, "Suppose We Took Service Seriously?," in *Service Management Effectiveness*, ed. D.E. Bowen, R.B. Chase, and T.G. Cummings (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), pp. 1–12.

[4] J.L. Heskett, W.E. Sasser, and C.W.L. Hart, *Service Breakthroughs: Changing the Rules of the Game* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 260.

[5] D.A. Tansik, "Managing Human-resources Issues for High-contact Service Personnel," in *Service Management Effectiveness*, ed. D.E. Bowen, R.B. Chase, and T.G. Cummings (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990), pp. 152–176.

[6] J.A. Czepiel, M.R. Solomon, and C. Surprenant, *The Service Encounter* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Health, 1985).

and to determine how their service was perceived by their customers, I developed a qualitative investigation based on observations and structured interviews. This exploratory research was aimed at moving beyond understanding basic skill requirements to determine ways employees approach delivering a service. An additional goal was to determine whether outstanding service providers used different approaches than those who offered average or even good service.

Comparing Interactions

The study took place over a period of eight months in a 1,200-room, full-service landmark hotel located in a major northeast city. The participants were hotel employees and managers in two departments, the front office and restaurant, and guests served by those hotel employees. First I examined the encounter between 14 front-office agents (all of whom agreed to participate) and 166 guests who had just been assisted by those agents. Then I examined the service encounters for six breakfast and lunch servers who agreed to participate (out of eight whom I invited) and 60 of their customers. In both departments I first recorded customers' assessments of the service transaction and then interviewed the providers to determine the rationale behind their approaches to delivery.

The front-office employees differed substantially from the restaurant servers in both age and tenure (see Exhibit 1). The front-office employees were a much younger group than the servers. For half of those in the front office, this was their first job out of college, and about a third of them were enrolled in school at the time of the study. The transient nature of the front-office crew is reflected in both the mean tenure of eight months and 35-percent turnover during the period of this study. Of the five employees who left during this time, four were promoted out of the department and into other areas of the hotel. Thus, a position in the front office was considered to be a training ground and a stepping stone by many employees. This department was not unionized, unlike the hotel's restaurant.

The restaurant workers presented a considerable contrast to their front-office counterparts. Among these six F&B servers, the age range was approximately 40 years (from ages just over 20 to about 60), and the average tenure was over 20 years. Members of a union, these restaurant servers and hostesses felt a strong allegiance to their department and viewed their job as their career. Due to their long tenures, most of these employees had seen dozens of managers come and go. (One server could count 39 managers over the years.)

Rating Service Delivery

To evaluate the check-in service provided by 14 front-office representatives, I interviewed guests as unobtrusively as possible. Immediately after they had checked in, I asked hotel guests whether I could escort them to their floor and interview them along the way. I asked participants about the service they had just received and asked them to rate the check-in experience. To maintain confidentiality I interviewed only those guests who carried their own

luggage and did not require assistance from the bell staff. Balancing the labor intensiveness of the research with advice I received from two quantitative researchers, I set a goal of obtaining at least ten guest evaluations for each employee participating in the study. To ensure employees were busy enough checking in guests to disregard my presence, I collected evaluations only on busy evenings, when the hotel expected 300 or more guests checking in.

I then repeated the process in the restaurant, interviewing guests after the check was placed on the table.

Customer perspective. The purpose of the interviews was to frame service performance from the customers' perspective, by having customers rate service performance against their expectations. Thus, as we walked to the room or sat at the table, I asked the customers to rate the degree to which the service encounter met their expectations using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "significantly below expectations" to "significantly exceeded expectations." I also asked the customers to rate employees' levels of competency, courtesy, and responsiveness—service dimensions drawn from Schneider and Bowen.[7] I compared those three dimensions with the service-encounter rating, hoping to get a sense of which dimension (if any) weighed most heavily in the determination of overall performance. Finally, I asked the hotel guests whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "the higher the room rate, the higher the expected levels of service" and to comment on whether they thought their room tariff was reasonable.

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[7] B. Schneider and D.E. Bowen, "Employee and Customer Perceptions of Service in Banks: Replication and Extension," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 70 (1985), pp. 323–333.

Questions Used in Employee Interviews

(1) Can you please state or describe your hotel's service mission?
(2) What does the company's service mission specifically mean for the way you have to do your job?
(3) To what degree do you agree with the hotel's service ideas? *(Rated on a 1 to 7 scale of complete disagreement to complete agreement.)* Why or why not?
(4) What type of service do you think hotel guests want?
(5) To what degree do you agree with the following statements? *(Rated on a 1 to 7 scale of complete disagreement to complete agreement.)* Why or why not?
— Providing service to guests is easy to do.
— Providing service to guests is enjoyable to do.
— An employee should be willing to provide the kind of service the company wishes.
(6) What techniques do you use to handle difficult guests and not let yourself feel bothered?
(7) How do you feel the hotel supports you or does not support you in appeasing difficult guests?

I completed 226 service evaluations in all—166 in the front office and 60 in the restaurant. Of the 171 guests whom I invited to participate, only five declined. I noted, however, that many participants seemed tired and were willing to accommodate only a brief survey. Those interviews lasted between three and five minutes. By contrast, restaurant customers appeared less rushed and seemed glad to speak with me. On average, restaurant interviews lasted five minutes.

Employees' perceptions. To understand what employees thought about the type of service they provided, including their reasoning behind their ideas, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the 20 participating employees. I asked those service providers about the degree to which they understood and agreed with the organization's service concepts, their approaches to service delivery, and techniques they used in service recovery. The accompanying box, above, shows the questions I asked.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Because these interviews were often conducted in full public view and I did not want employees to feel nervous and uncomfortable, I did not tape-record the conversations. Instead, I took

Exhibit 2
Evaluation of service (N = 226)

	Mean	Std Dev	Range
Competency	3.98	.58	3.00 to 4.90
Courtesy	4.05	.60	2.98 to 4.83
Responsiveness	4.03	.51	3.03 to 4.90
Overall evaluation	3.99	.54	3.02 to 4.85

Notes: All measures taken on a Likert-type scale of 1 (significantly below expectations) to 5 (significantly exceeded expectations). Of the 226 customers sampled, 84 were women.

extensive notes and transcribed them in longhand immediately following each interview. Once I had completed all the employee interviews I analyzed the interviews' content, coding for key themes that emerged from the data. I then compared respondents' answers against the customers' service ratings.

Gaining context. In addition to conducting the interviews, I observed the two departments for over 30 hours to obtain a sense of the departments' routines and to see the natural interactions among employees, customers, and managers. Those observations helped me to identify and understand contextual differences between the two departments that may have influenced service performance. I also wanted to supplement my interviews with my own observations of participants' activities and to allow participants to become accustomed to my presence. I took notes at the side of the front desk or sitting in a booth or at the bar in the restaurant and transcribed them after each visit to the hotel.

Customers' Conceptualization of Service

To reiterate, my interviews with the customers occurred immediately after the service encounter. Based on those conversations, I have become suspicious of research that asks for guests' recollections an hour or two (or longer) beyond the service. Here's why: in my interviews I found that even immediately following the service, customers had a difficult time discussing specific elements in the service encounter. In general, they took notice only of the outliers, that is, when service was exceptionally good or exceptionally poor. The shorter the transaction, moreover, the less important the quality of the encounter was to guests. For example, guests checking into the hotel were mostly focused on the time between when they walked into the hotel and when they had a key in hand. If the process was quick (due to room preselection, for example), they were satisfied. Obtaining an evaluation of the courtesy, responsiveness, or competence of the service provider often required guests to pause and think for a moment.

Interviews in the restaurant provided a contrast, in part because the restaurant's service interaction was more lengthy and complex than transactions at the front desk. Restaurant customers were relaxed and talkative. My analysis of these interviews indicated that two related matters were important to guests in the restaurant: **(1)** a feeling of being paid attention to and **(2)** a notion that the servers cared about helping them. I found that customers wanted recognition within a few minutes of sitting down. If that did not occur, the customer typically gave low ratings. Restaurant customers were able to articulate a rating much more quickly than those checking into the hotel. The restaurant group was also more likely to provide the same rating across the three measures (i.e., competency, courtesy, and responsiveness) and saw little distinction among the service dimensions that I sought to test.

Indeed, as shown in Exhibit 2, I found no statistically significant differences in ratings among competency, courtesy, or responsiveness—

or on overall rattings. The four measures showed correlations ranging from .91 to .97. That is, customers were likely to offer the same rating along each of the three dimensions, as well as for the overall rating. Generally, men gave lower scores than did women. Where a man might give a score of 4.5, a woman was more likely to rate the same service provider on the same evening as providing a service level of 5.0. Eighty percent of guests agreed that their expectations would be higher if they were paying a higher room rate, and 95 percent of those surveyed felt their room rate was average for this city. (The remaining guests felt that their room rate was high or else they were being given a complimentary room.) No one said the room rate was an excellent deal.

Satisfied customers. For the most part, guests thought that the service that they received was fine, but meeting their expectations seemed to be related to receiving recognition and experiencing timely or expeditious service. Perhaps the most telling finding is that even when guests had a difficult time remembering the quality of the service they just received, they immediately noticed the outliers—that is, cases of exceptionally good or exceptionally poor service. Indeed, the respondents rated four of the 20 participating employees as delivering consistently outstanding levels of service (three front-office representatives and one restaurant server). Comments from appreciative customers who interacted with these four employees included the following appreciative comments: "I don't know how she could have been better"; "She knew what we wanted before we did"; and "I would expect this [type of service] at the Ritz, not here." In contrast, typical comments from customers who rated employees as good or average service providers were "she was fine; did a

good job" and "yes, the service was good and met my expectations."

A review of the customer evaluations showed that the four outstanding employees averaged an overall evaluation score of 4.59, compared with an overall evaluation score of 3.99 for the entire group and 3.75 for the remaining 16 employees. In fact, a nonparametric statistical test revealed a significant difference between evaluation scores for the four exemplary employees as a group and the other participants.[8] I focused on the four employees to determine whether their views of service differed from those of their counterparts.

Employees' Views of Service

I analyzed the interviews prior to tallying service-delivery scores. All 20 employees had a general idea of the hotel's service expectations, although most had a difficult time recalling the organization's service mission. Only three of the 20 could recount the mission statement close to verbatim. Most commented that they remembered hearing it only during orientation, even though the mission statement was posted in the front office. When asked about the type of service the hotel expects its employees to provide, respondents quickly offered their perceptions. Nine of the 20 participants spoke about the hotel's wanting employees to cater to the business traveler and offer quick and efficient service. Five others spoke about the hotel's wanting employees to offer friendly and smiling service that makes guests feel welcome. An additional five respondents spoke about the hotel's wanting employees to ensure that guests leave satisfied and become a repeat source of business. One respondent admitted to being

Above all, meeting guests' expectations seems to be related to recognizing them and then giving them timely or expeditious service.

[8] A Mann-Whitney test of independence, which is similar to a t-test for small samples, revealed a significant difference between groups at $p < .01$.

Exhibit 3
Employees' views of the service encounter

Exceptional employees	Good employees
• Convey a long-term relationship in a momentary encounter	• View the encounter as providing temporary, pleasant assistance
"This is the job where you have to learn to read people's minds."	"If I'm nice, they're nice back... Sometimes I forget to look at the guest. But I try to be nice."
"It's really all about reading the guest."	"Be nice to the guest or you get fired."
"You have to be a step ahead of people so you know exactly what they want."	"Some people just need a smile and a little bit of attention."
"I show interest in giving them the best service and I stay right with them—right to the end. I treat them like family."	"In a nice way, I try and serve them. That's my job."

Exhibit 4
Employees' views of the difficulty of providing service

Exceptional employees	Good employees
• Recognize the difficulty and complexity of service	• View providing service as easy
"I feel I'm a failure if I can't follow the company's service mission. It's one of the hardest jobs because you have to deal with people of various backgrounds."	"I can do it in my sleep. I don't think about it. I just turn it on."
"You have to get it from the heart. You have to really mean it. It's difficult to do."	"Providing service is easy but it doesn't always feel like you've accomplished something."
"The biggest part of the job and the most difficult is reading the guests."	"Given the right information, the materials needed, and a positive attitude, guests are happy."
"Everyone's different. That's what makes this job so challenging. It's not easy."	"If you are happy working here then it's easy to make the guest happy."

clueless: "I really don't know what the 'hotel god' would like."

I found that the differences between the four exemplary employees and the rest of the group can be summarized by four distinct characteristics. Those characteristics are:

(1) The ability to convey a long-term relationship in a momentary encounter;

(2) A recognition of the complexity and difficulty in providing service;

(3) A recognition of the big picture (how service encounters relate to the hotel's financial success); and

(4) Empathy with the managers' role.

I will discuss each of those factors in turn (see Exhibits 3–6).

A Momentary, Long-term Relationship

I asked employees why they provide a particular type of service, and in the course of answering this question the respondents also explained how they view the service encounter. The responses to this question (as well as to the question, "What type of service do you think the hotel's guests want?") revealed two distinctions between the excellent servers from those who provided good or average service (see Exhibit 3).

The first distinction is that those who provided the best service were able to convey a sense of an already existing relationship with the customer. They accomplish this by paying attention to and focusing on what is important to each particular guest. By doing so they create a sense of familiarity with their customers. These employees are able to act as though they have already helped (and thus knew) that guest many times in the past. Three of the four employees cited experience as important to helping them reach a skilled level of service. One commented: "This is the job where you have to learn to read people's minds."

In contrast, those rated lower (but not necessarily poor) in providing service focused primarily on completing the transaction. They certainly helped the customer, but they also recognized that it was temporary assistance aimed at getting the customer what he or she needed. Eight of the 16 average-to-good employees mentioned that they focused on being nice. An example of this view is demonstrated by the quote: "If I'm nice, they're nice back. I listen very carefully. Sometimes they're tired and hungry and don't want to be here. Sometimes I forget to look at the guest. I'm looking at the computer. But I try to be nice." Another respondent explained: "Be nice to the guest or you get fired. But that doesn't mean we don't feel like ripping a head off once in a while." One employee in this group did mention the differing needs of customers, but he did not discuss the connection between those needs and his role in anticipating them. He said: "It's not easy or possible to satisfy everyone. Everyone has different needs. It's always hard to please everybody. To satisfy different needs, we sometimes can't do it perfectly."

Recognizing the Complexity of Service

The second distinction is that the exemplary workers commented on how difficult it was to try to anticipate the needs of so many different types of customers (see Exhibit 4). That is, the outstanding employees did not find their jobs easy to do. Their responses suggest that this is because they asked much of themselves. Said one: "You have to get it from the heart. Have to really mean it. It's difficult to do." Another stated: "I feel I'm a failure if I can't follow the company's service mission. It is one of the hardest jobs because you have to deal with people of various backgrounds and who have different needs and differ-

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Exhibit 5
Employees' views of the importance of service to the hotel's success

Exceptional employees	Good employees
• Recognize the big, future picture	• Have a short-term focus that does not connect with the hotel's bottom line
"Service means our success. It's that simple."	"Some people come in here with a chip on their shoulder. I try to give service as fast as I can and stay away. It doesn't make your job harder. You let it slide."
"Our product sells itself. If we exceed, our guests will come back."	"The hotel wants a quick and efficient check in. So I do it."
"We do what we can to make the guest want to return. If someone pays $189 for a room we'd better be on our toes."	"Most if not all of the steps [during check in] are outlined for optimal guest service"
"If we don't care about them, they won't come back. The most important thing is caring."	"It's all about being friendly, smiling, and providing service efficiently."

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ent levels of satisfaction." One other respondent commented: "Different guests respond in different ways to the front-office agent and his method of interaction with the guest. The biggest part of the job and the most difficult is reading the guests."

All four highly rated providers mentioned techniques they developed to keep themselves focused on "reading the guests' minds" to solve customers' problems and to protect themselves from being exhausted from their jobs. These employees also recognized that a rude guest was not necessarily a rude person. They left open the possibility that a guest could feel stressed or be in an off mood. One individual mentioned: "With a rude customer, I stay calm and never get upset. I just figure they're having a bad day."

Many of the average-to-good employees, in contrast, found providing service relatively easy to do. For example, they seemed less disappointed when they could not solve a guest's problem and more easily

shrugged off rude or demanding guests. One server said, "I can do it in my sleep. I don't think about it. I just turn it on." A front-office agent commented, "They're asking us to do basic things. Providing service is easy but doesn't always feel like you've accomplished something." Another front-office representative said, "I know how to get back at them [rude guests]. I give them a room by the elevator."

The Big Picture

The outstanding service providers recognized the importance of their role to the success of the hotel (see Exhibit 5). For these employees, meeting the organization's bottom line was a personal goal. One participant offered: "Service means our success. It's that simple."

The other respondents mentioned speed and efficiency as being important to the service experience. Oriented more toward the short term, they did not discuss the connection between their own role and building loyal customers or the bot-

Exhibit 6
Employees' views of management

Exceptional employees	Good employees
• *Empathy toward management*	• *One-dimensional view of management*
"Our managers have it tough. I try to help them out as much as I can."	"The supervisors and managers are great. They are here to help us when it gets tough."
"The supervisors are great. They are often caught in the middle."	"I always call my manager when I need it [help]. They don't want us to get stuck."
"Top management is constantly coming up with new policies and procedures. It really makes it hard on our front-office managers."	"He's great. He's been here a while so he knows what we need."
"We all work together here. I do the training to make it easier for my manager."	"He pretty much leaves us alone. He's real supportive."

tom line. One respondent commented: "It's about being friendly, smiling, and providing service efficiently." Another said, "The hotel wants a quick and efficient check in. So I do it."

Awareness of Managers' Concerns

The highest-rated servers realized that their immediate managers have a difficult role (see Exhibit 6). These employees saw their supervisors as having to answer to and accommodate the dictates of upper management. They viewed their own manager as a messenger who had to deal with many policy changes. All four believed that upper management was in a state of turmoil and commented that doing their own job well was one way to make things easier for an already overburdened manager. Comments from these participants included, "Our managers have it tough. I try to help them out as much as I can"; and "The supervisors are great. They are often caught in the middle."

The other 16 respondents generally viewed their managers as problem solvers—and essentially added to their workload. Many employees

in the front office, for instance, often called on their managers when an encounter became difficult. Those respondents seemed to have a one-dimensional view of their manager and did not consider the complexities of the manager's situation. A typical comment was: "I always call my manager when I need help."

In summary, the primary difference between outstanding service providers and those who were rated average to good seems to be that the outstanding providers brought a thoughtful, almost painstaking approach to their jobs. Instead of focusing on commitment to the organization or its service mission, they believed they had a type of calling that took constant work and attention. Their effort created what might be called a "relational transaction" that involved having the capability to reach out, relate to, and connect with other people who usually were strangers. The top service providers had the ability to make strangers feel like warm acquaintances. The positive responses they often received back from these strangers became their reward.

The Role of the Work Environment

Even though the restaurant and the front office offered two contrasting work environments, I found consistency in employees' service concepts across the two departments. That is, regardless of the type of service provided (check in versus restaurant service), the outstanding service providers' views about the encounter were similar. Even so, I thought it would be valuable to examine the two departments' different contexts. In particular, I was curious about the possible influence of tips on service in the restaurant, given that front-office representatives are not tipped.

The work environment in these two departments was drastically different in three ways: (1) the

restaurant's workforce was stable compared to that of the front office; **(2)** tips in the restaurant provide direct feedback on service outcomes, something that rarely occurs in the front office; and **(3)** the restaurant was unionized, while the front office was not.

Stability. As stated above, the average tenure of the restaurant servers was over 20 years, while the front office had fairly high turnover. Without exception, the servers identified with their restaurant more than with their hotel. Their allegiance was to the restaurant manager and the hostess (who was the union representative). The restaurant employees whom I interviewed did not know the names of the hotel's top managers. One employee commented, "They pretty much leave us alone. We see the bigwigs eat here once in a while, but that's pretty much it. They're upstairs." In contrast, the front-office employees identified themselves as hotel employees, and outside of a few small groups I did not sense a departmental unity (perhaps because of the employees' short tenure). Overall, I observed the restaurant as having a more cohesive employee group than that found in the front office.

Instant feedback. The second major difference between the restaurant and the front office had to do with the correlation of service with outcomes. The restaurant servers generally recognized that the better their service, the better their tips. (On a good day, these servers made $100 in tips.) Four of the six servers stated that money was a big motivator in their providing service—although two of them said this in a whisper, as if they were not proud of that realization. The highly rated server was the only one who did not mention money during the interview. She seemed to view service as her calling and planned to keep working until retirement. By contrast, front-office agents had no ostensible motivating connection between the service they provide and their monetary outcome. They eventually receive a performance review and salary increase, but no increase is guaranteed and none of the employees mentioned it.

Solidarity. The third essential difference between these two departments was that the restaurant servers were members of a strong union (which represents this city's restaurant employees). The strength and cohesiveness of the bargaining unit is shown by the fact that two servers on different occasions alluded to being able to get rid of managers whom they did not like. As an example of an unusual working condition, restaurant employees were allowed to take up to a three-month leave at any time without losing seniority. In contrast, the front-office employees were not organized and were required to follow the hotel's rules related to disciplinary and reward procedures. Front-office agents were at-will employees who could be terminated without explanation, although the hotel usually followed progressive-discipline procedures.

Despite those three considerable differences, my analysis of the two departments showed no appreciable differences in service delivery. Service ratings and interview responses were similar across the two departments, and results could not be distinguished between the two areas to any meaningful degree.

Relational Efficacy

Although this research is limited, it has implications for understanding what makes service encounters memorable. Outstanding service providers in this study spoke about the calling they believed they had to determine what the customer wants before the customer actually knows or articulates the need. In the process of a momentary transaction these service providers were able to create meaningful connections and to provide a sense of an already existing relationship with customers. Not only could they understand the customers' perspective, but these employees could communicate that understanding through the service they provided. A term that describes the ability to make such a connection is "relational efficacy."[9]

Performing with an orientation toward relational efficacy was an intrinsic decision that the service providers in this study made independent of their surroundings, including the organization's service mission and managers' actions. The outstanding servers recognized the complexities involved in something as seemingly simple as a two-minute customer encounter, and they worked hard to focus their attention on using the time to make a connection.

In contrast, average-to-good service providers seemed either to miss such subtleties or were not motivated to pursue working at building relationships with customers. Instead, those servers made what were probably accurate assumptions about the importance of attending to speed and efficiency in serving the guest, and they viewed the encounter as a transaction between two strangers who probably would not meet again soon. Unlike the exceptional employees, the good and average service providers seemed less committed to making the encounter feel special for customers.

Managing Hospitality Service

An understanding of what makes a service encounter memorable is complicated by the fact that customers in this exploratory study had

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[9] This term was coined by Candace Jones, associate professor of management at Boston College, as she and I discussed the results of this study.

difficulty articulating their concept of exceptional service. They knew when they saw exceptionally good or poor service, but otherwise they seemed to pay little attention to the service provider's performance. That outcome poses a challenge for hospitality managers. If customers notice only extremely memorable service encounters (either far above or badly below expectations), then the work some organizations take to focus on and provide outstanding service may be a wasted effort. The organization can attempt to ensure the unlikely outcome that all transactions are memorable, but even that may not be the best course. As Sutton and Rafaeli found, speed was the priority in transactional encounters, rather than affective service.[10] Thus, it is possible to provide service that is better than expected, but still not good enough to be memorable. In that instance, a good effort may be essentially wasted on a customer who was just looking for a quick, efficient transaction. At the same time, though, this research indicates that even when tired guests are looking for a quick transaction, they do notice when the service has been exemplary.

Results from this preliminary work suggest that hospitality companies should examine their mission, positioning, and pricing to determine whether it makes sense to go all out to impress customers. Such a comment might seem heretical, given the industry's lengthy fascination with service excellence. However, managers should determine whether focusing on "creating a sense of a relationship through a transaction" is truly important to the hotel or restaurant's success. Drop-dead service almost certainly is essential to

[10] R.I. Sutton and A. Rafaeli, "Untangling the Relationship between Displayed Emotions and Organizational Sales: The Case of Convenience Stores," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 31. (1988), pp. 461–487.

the success of high-end operations, where personalized attention is the company's credo. The issue for managers is to determine what level of service fits a particular operation.

This study suggests that finding a proper service level is a conundrum, because the study seems to indicate that restaurants and hotels that simply encourage their employees to offer good service in a general, unfocused fashion will probably end up with a mixed service offering. A few service providers will be able to deliver memorable service, while the rest will be forgotten—even before the guest reaches the elevator, as I discovered. If memorable service is not an essential factor in a hotel or restaurant's service proposition, the operation is probably wasting its money and effort in encouraging outstanding (as opposed to merely good or efficient) service.

So too, these preliminary findings suggest that quality initiatives in service organizations could be examined with a different lens. The notion of quality management may imply an impossible attempt to control that which cannot be harnessed—namely, an individual (a service provider) reaching out and relating to another individual (the customer). Certainly the idea of trying to break the service encounter down into basic operational steps that can be taught to all employees is important, but it may miss the more ambiguous but critical affective element of service. In other words, it seems unlikely that employees can be trained to convey an interest in customers—as the outstanding servers were able to do.

Limited and tentative. This study is only a first step. Many of the contextual factors that may influence service, such as reward and feedback systems, were not considered in this preliminary study. The study also begs the question of whether guests are even expecting

outstanding service on such a simple transaction as a hotel check in. Different results may occur in a different hotel in the same chain or in a different organization. Furthermore, it is risky to draw conclusions from such a small sample. A larger study with more participants and more evaluations of service performance for each participant is needed. Additionally, a similar study in an organization with a stronger service-oriented culture would provide a necessary contrast.

Despite its limitations, I believe that this study offers what could be an important concept for managers to consider. Although that concept, relational efficacy, needs further examination, it offers a novel way to examine service delivery. Since the guests in this study responded to servers who connected with them, hotel or restaurant managers could benefit by considering the ways in which their employees approach service delivery. Facilitating a conversation around the notion of relational efficacy could help managers uncover ways their own employees use the hotel's mission as a service guideline, and how they structure their own guidelines for interacting with guests.

If this study is any indication, both employees and customers have difficulties discussing the complexities of service encounters and are particularly at a loss in articulating the nature of outstanding service. This research found that most individuals recognize this type of service only on the rare occasions when they experience it. Even so, outstanding service is usually attributed to the service provider's personality, rather than to the great effort and attention that he or she brings to the transaction. This study points to not only appreciating those subtleties and complexities, but to taking the tentative first steps to understand them more deeply. **CQ**