

Volume 5

---

2020

## Do All Angry Customers Complain?

Hyounae (Kelly) Min

*California State Polytechnic University Pomona*

Hyun Jeong Kim

*Washington State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://via.library.depaul.edu/ichrie\\_rr](https://via.library.depaul.edu/ichrie_rr)



Part of the [Food and Beverage Management Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Min, Hyounae (Kelly) and Kim, Hyun Jeong (2020) "Do All Angry Customers Complain?," *ICHRIE Research Reports*: Vol. 5 , Article 2.

Available at: [https://via.library.depaul.edu/ichrie\\_rr/vol5/iss1/2](https://via.library.depaul.edu/ichrie_rr/vol5/iss1/2)

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the International Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education (ICHRIE). It has been accepted for inclusion in *ICHRIE Research Reports* by an authorized editor of DePaul University School of Hospitality Leadership. For more information, please contact [rr@depaul.edu](mailto:rr@depaul.edu). The compilation of the journal issue is copyrighted by ICHRIE, but authors retain the copyright for their article.

## **Do All Angry Customers Complain?**

### **Customer complaints as a learning opportunity for hospitality firms**

In a competitive consumer market, organizations increasingly look to non-traditional sources for novel ideas and strategies to gain a competitive advantage (Grant, 2013). Without doubt, one important voice comes from customers especially regarding company performance. Customer complaints, once considered as an expense to organizations (Luo, 2007), are now viewed as shedding light on organizations' key performance practices, providing useful information for organizations to learn from their mistakes (Hu & Kim, 2018; Min, Lim, & Magnini, 2015; Min & Kim, 2019; Mittal, Huppertz, & Khare, 2008). In addition, customer complaints enable organizations to immediately redress issues, and when properly handled, organizations can maintain customer satisfaction and return intention (Min et al., 2015; Spreng, Harrell, & Mackoy, 1995). Through experimental designs using a failed service in the restaurant, we investigated whether all angry customers complain to the service provider and if not, what prevents them from raising their voice<sup>1</sup>.

### **Anger and customer complaints**

Since customer complaints should be regarded as a learning opportunity, it is important to identify what drives customer complaints. It is commonly believed that negative emotions, such as anger, elicited from a negative event are the main driver for customer complaints (Watson & Spence, 2007). In other words, when encountering a failed service, those who are angry about the failure will complain while those who are not upset about the failed service won't. However, we found that not all angry customers complain. The key factor that determines whether angry customers will speak up their mind or not is a sense of power.

### **Angry customers do not complain if not feeling powerful**

Psychologists assert that feeling powerful makes people focus more on the self while feeling powerless makes people concerned more about others than the self (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). In the consumer behavior context, high-power customers spend more for themselves and

perceive their possessions as more valuable; in contrast, low-power customers spend more on others and place less value on their own possessions. Given the characteristics of “power”, those who feel powerful (self-focused) are likely to express their complaints without hesitation. However, those who feel powerless (other-oriented) may be hesitant to complain openly. The results show that customers who feel powerful indeed complain about a service failure as soon as they are angry; on the other hand, customers feeling powerless are not comfortable making face-to-face complaints in the restaurant although they are very upset.

### **Environmental cues to enhance the sense of power**

Hospitality practitioners who wish to learn from customer complaints must find ways to encourage customers to speak up their mind on site where service failures occur. The fundamental service recovery protocol emphasizes immediate actions to correct the mistake. Handling on-site complaints is much more efficient and effective than negative word-of-mouth or negative online reviews because hospitality operators have an opportunity to please customers before their departure, and this prompt resolution minimizes the possible negative word-of-mouth or reviews. One simple, yet novel way to enhance customer sense of power in the restaurant setting is to manipulate the menu. Our experiment (restaurant name: *Atena*) shows that a subtle phrase embedded in a menu can affect customers’ sense of power. The three power conditions we used are: “*Atena, only one bite and we got you*” (low-power); “*Atena, where the customer is always king*” (high-power); and “*Atena, where nature comes to your table*” (control). Our findings suggest that participants in the low-power condition indeed complain less in public, reducing an opportunity for the service provider to hear from customers.

Shown in our experiment, hospitality practitioners should consider utilizing the store or service environment including employees. For example, the body language of service employees can be a signal of power. Customers may feel powerless if treated by employees with assertive postures. People feel powerful when imagining being in a powerful position (e.g., boss vs. subordinate)

(Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Hospitality companies should understand the effect of power on customer behavior to increase customer feedback.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This research report is based on the study conducted by Min, Joireman, and Kim (2019).

### References

- Fast, N. J., Gruenfeld, D. H., Sivanathan, N., & Galinsky, A. D. (2009). Illusory control: A generative force behind power's far-reaching effects. *Psychological Science, 20*(4), 502-508.
- Grant, A. M. (2013). Rocking the boat but keeping it steady: The role of emotion regulation in employee voice. *Academy of Management Journal, 56*(6), 1703-1723.
- Luo, X. (2007). Consumer negative voice and firm-idiosyncratic stock returns. *Journal of Marketing, 71*(3), 75-88.
- Hu, Y., & Kim, H. J. (2018). Positive and negative eWOM motivations and hotel customers' eWOM creation: Does personality matter? *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 75*, 27-37.
- Min, H. K., Joireman, J., & Kim, H. J. (2019). Understanding why anger predicts intention to complain among high but not low power customers: A test of competing models. *Journal of Business Research, 95*, 93-102.
- Min, H., Lim, Y., & Magnini, V. P. (2015). Factors affecting customer satisfaction in responses to negative online hotel reviews: The impact of empathy, paraphrasing, and speed. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly, 56*(2), 223-231.
- Min, H., & Kim, H.J. (2019). When service failure is interpreted as discrimination: Emotion, power, and voice. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 82*, 59-67.
- Mittal, V., Huppertz, J. W., & Khare, A. (2008). Customer complaining: The role of tie strength and information control. *Journal of Retailing, 84*(2), 195-204.
- Spreng, R. A., Harrell, G. D., & Mackoy, R. D. (1995). Service recovery: Impact on satisfaction and intentions. *Journal of Services Marketing, 9*(1), 15-23.