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Have you ever been kept waiting by a service provider well beyond the proposed arrival time? Your answer is likely “yes.” In many instances, once the provider ultimately arrives, they say something along the lines of, “Sorry for the wait.” While an apology statement, such as “I’m sorry,” by service providers means they recognize their fault in the situation and thus may help restore customer satisfaction to a certain degree, our research suggests that a statement of appreciation, such as saying “Thank you for waiting,” could increase customer satisfaction even further. In real estate, if service providers address customers with appreciation rather than an apology, it can significantly improve a customer’s self-esteem, which in turn, will boost post-transgression customer satisfaction with your service.

Appreciation vs. Apology

Service companies can use symbolic recovery, such as an apology or an expression of appreciation, to regain customer satisfaction after a service failure occurs. Once a customer becomes dissatisfied with a service, a domino effect ensues that can lead to customer complaints, product returns, and ultimately customers switching to another company.¹ Researchers have discovered that symbolic recovery is a cost-effective method that can restore customer satisfaction². Therefore, it is important to understand how to best utilize symbolic recovery to maintain positive service provider-consumer interactions.

While symbolic recovery can be used in many forms, our research focuses on why appreciation is better than an apology. An apology conveys that the service provider recognizes and takes responsibility for the service failure. Although an apology serves as a cost-effective method of boosting customer satisfaction, it requires that the provider admit fault and take accountability for the transgression. Directly after the provider apologizes, the customer will likely have a positive response. However, this positive response will often dissipate, and lingering negative thoughts about the service transgression will likely surface and hinder future positive provider-consumer interactions. After a service failure, service companies can use an apology to boost customer satisfaction; yet they should recognize the long-term consequences of admitting fault.
What makes an expression of appreciation better than an apology? Appreciation highlights customers’ merits and contributions after the transgression occurs. Therefore, appreciation shifts the customer’s thoughts from the mistake made by the service provider to an acknowledgement of the customer’s sacrifice. For example, if service providers keep their customers waiting for an extended period of time, instead of saying “sorry for the wait” they can say “thank you for the wait.” This expression of appreciation recognizes customers’ positive qualities (such as being patient) but also signals an admission of guilt. In essence, appreciation acknowledges the service failure but does so in a positive manner that increases the self-esteem of the customer.

Both an apology and an expression of appreciation are symbolic recovery mechanisms that increase customer satisfaction. Our research finds that service providers should shift their focus from emphasizing the service providers’ fault (apology) to highlighting customers’ contributions and merits (appreciation), which in turn can increase consumers’ self-esteem.

**How Does Self-Esteem Play a Role?**

Appreciation is better than an apology due to its ability to use customers’ contributions to their self-esteem. But what if the pursuit of self-esteem isn’t a dominant motivator for an individual? The desire for heightened self-esteem varies depending on the level of narcissism of a person. Narcissism is a concept that implies an inflated sense of self and captures the strength of people’s desire to pursue self-esteem. An individual’s level of narcissism moderates the effects appreciation has on self-esteem. That is, individuals high in narcissism have a strong desire to pursue self-esteem. As a result, they will use the acknowledgement of their contributions and merits to increase the way they value themselves. However, if an individual is low in narcissism, an expression of appreciation is often less effective. For these individuals an expression of appreciation is not necessarily better than an apology. Our research suggests that it is important for service providers to informally assess a person’s narcissism (e.g., are younger, those who use social networks more) to determine whether appreciation will be better than an apology.

**Real Estate Implications**

For all service providers, including those in real estate, altering your linguistic framing from saying “sorry” to “thank you” can greatly affect a customer’s satisfaction after a service failure occurs. Although both apology and appreciation address the mistake made, appreciation does so while also increasing the customer’s self-esteem. Appreciation acknowledges fault while also highlighting the customer’s merits and contributions. As a real estate professional, transitioning from an apology to appreciation can be a vitally important tool that can be used to increased customer satisfaction after a transgression occurs. If service providers are able to implement “thank you” into instances of redressing service failures, then they will enhance the satisfaction the customer has with their services, their interactions, and the organization as a whole.
Recommended Reading


References


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