The Verbal Judo Approach in Demanding Customer Encounters

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This exploratory article focuses on increasing our understanding of demanding customer encounters, more specifically, detailing the use of the verbal judo (VJ) approach in such situations. It is an interpersonal technique predominantly used in police training in the U.S. The existing services marketing research provides limited guidance when encountering demanding customer situations, which tend to occur on a relatively regular basis in service companies. This study approaches the topic through qualitative one-to-one and focus group interviews. The empirical results clearly indicate that there exists a need for new approaches in demanding customer situations and that company procedures should be based on rigid and well-planned steps. The use of the VJ approach seems to increase personnel confidence and overall motivation. From a managerial perspective, VJ emphasises the importance of interpersonal communication and an empathetic service attitude. The study as a whole underlines the importance of developing our interpersonal skills so that communication should always take into account the situation and context in question. The authors suggest that further research should cover the communicative role of the customer and include the development of various demanding customer typologies.

KEYWORDS   conflict management, customer, customer encounter, service, service design, service development, verbal judo

The paradigm shift in marketing has highlighted the role of the customer. Having been more or less faceless objects, customers have become active

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subjects in recent years, and customer orientation has become an essential topic in business operations (Kokko, 2005). One important element in customer orientation is customer participation (or involvement), which refers to the commonly accepted idea that good service is based on two-way activity and cooperation. Therefore, increasing customer participation has become a major issue in marketing and customer management research, and in services literature, the term customer participation generally refers to the customer's active role in the production or delivery of a service (Bettencourt, 1997). Together with this ongoing paradigm shift, a number of new areas of competence have been brought to the forefront. One area is to managerially take care of customer encounters. As long as these encounters are positively perceived by both parties, there are no problems, but when either or both parties perceive the encounter as not fulfilling their explicit or implicit expectations, it becomes a demanding customer encounter. Therefore, the service encounter concept is a useful way of focusing on essential interpersonal elements of service firm performance. In earlier research, the focus has primarily been on personal interactions between customers and employees in service encounters, and more specifically, on the role played by service personnel (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Bitner, 1992 as cited in Baron, Harris, & Davies, 1996). Some scholars have linked customer encounters with quality and customer satisfaction (McCollough, Berry, & Yadev, 2000), whereas others have emphasized the emotional state and coping strategies of service personnel in difficult customer situations (Bailey & McCollough, 2000). Related to customer satisfaction research, earlier research has paid considerable attention to service recovery issues (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Prior research suggests that poor recovery efforts intensify customer dissatisfaction. Research results underline the importance of successful customer recovery after a service failure. This stream of research is mainly concerned with customer satisfaction issues, however, only a few studies have explored recovery solutions from the service firm's perspective and an even smaller body of work deals with employee attitudes in service recovery settings. Furthermore, companies seem to have a poor notion of the need to also "recover" employees (Johnston & Michel, 2008).

The general understanding today seems to be that an increasing number of frontline personnel in service companies confront demanding customer situations on a regular basis. In Finland for instance, approximately 5% of employees annually face threatening or violent customer encounters (Heiskanen, 2004). This figure seems to be a general rule of thumb internationally of the proportion of employees facing violence, threats of violence, verbal insults, or harassment from customers or from co-workers (Heiskanen, 2004). It is fair to argue that norm-breaking "deviant" verbal or physical behaviors do not merely exist, but are also relatively common (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). The current situation of frequent demanding service

encounters establishes a clear need for framework(s) for frontline service personnel in coping with these challenging situations. It is obvious that settings in these customer encounters can be relatively complex: Company representatives should, on the one hand, represent the company to their customers, and they should, on the other hand, represent the customers to the company, acting inside the firm as "champions" of customers' interests and managing the buyer-seller relationships (Kotler & Armstrong, 2006). All of these activities should be carried out with both customer value and company profit in mind.

In the service marketing literature beginning in the late 1970s, the traditional interface between production and consumption has been called the interactive marketing function (Grönroos, 2000). In more recent studies, Kotler and Armstrong (2006) highlight the quality of buyer-seller interaction during the service encounter and show how (the perceived) service quality is dependent on it. However, few authors have presented practical guidance or tools that could enable managing such demanding moments of truth. Generally, dealing with complaining customers may be a difficult and sometimes upsetting experience for frontline employees (Johnston & Michel, 2008). Managers who do not deal with emotional stress facing their frontline employees will be more likely to encounter increased staff absenteeism, lack of commitment, burnout, stress, and turnover among employees. These issues, in turn, can lead to lower customer satisfaction and eventually have a negative impact on service quality (Dallimore, Sparks, & Butcher, 2007). The traditional understanding of "customer as king" tends to avoid the possibility that the customer may also act as a "dictator" in a service encounter and that the customer focus may be detrimental to both customers and employees (and the organizations they represent). Some researchers have explored the activities of deviant customers; as Reynolds and Harris (2006) point out, studies have overlooked the perspective of how employees within organizations, which are driven by a customer focus, cope with public customer misbehavior. In this article, the attempt is to increase our understanding of demanding customer encounters in general and to take a closer look at one potential framework that could be useful in demanding customer encounters—verbal judo (VJ).

VJ as a concept was introduced in 1993 by George J. Thompson and Jerry B. Jenkins (Thompson & Jenkins, 1993), and their ideas have been tested on a limited scale in the U.S. in police force training. The somewhat interesting challenge in the police force is that the more action-packed parts of policing attract participants to Citizen Police Academies, which then can emphasize the less adventuresome aspects. Other researchers have tried to further develop the ideas behind the VJ framework (Berckhan, 2001; Johnson, 2004; Kaminski & Martin, 2000; Raffel, 2005; Baron et al., 1996). However, the outcome of research in this area tends to be fragmented and there seems to be the need for a more holistic and unifying approach.

Furthermore, we would like to attempt applying the basic ideas of VJ in service businesses other than policing as well.

DEMANDING CUSTOMER ENCOUNTERS

A customer encounter is generally considered demanding if either or both parties perceive it as not fulfilling its implicit or explicit expectations. In this article, however, the main focus is on encounters in which the company contact person perceives the situation as stressful or otherwise demanding. This increased stress level may lead to personnel burnout, which then has a negative effect on the service quality level (Yagil, 2006). In other words, we approach demanding encounters from a company point of view, which has been a somewhat neglected focus in service encounter related research (Svensson, 2006). Furthermore, we exclude all "behind the scenes" support processes and operational events that take place outside actual customer encounters. The focus is purely on contact personnel-customer encounters.

Demanding customers may appear in various types. Reynolds and Harris (2006) have gathered a variety of misbehaving customer qualities that they have labeled as deviant behavior. Examples of such customer behaviors are shoplifting, vandalism, customer resistance, customer aggression, violence, and unsubstantiated customer complaints. These actions may be considered extremely demanding from the frontline service personnel's point of view. It is safe to conclude that difficult customers usually demand a lot of effort from customer service personnel.

In service settings, customers usually act on an emotional level. Such emotional responses may be positive ones, like customer delight (Oliver, Rust, & Varki, 1997), or customers may even feel friendship towards the service provider (Goodwin & Gremler, 1996). Customers may enter the service environment in a positive, negative, or neutral mood. Their mood may be constant throughout the encounter, or it may alter because of their interaction with the surrounding environment (Gardner, 1985). Emotions-related research has viewed the issue both as a post-consumption response and as the emotional state the customer brings to the service encounter (Cook, Bowen, Chase, Dasu, Stewart, & Tansik, 2002). Demanding customers typically bring a negative emotional state in service settings. Customers may be angry, furious, or even hostile in service situations. Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg (2003) point out that people associate anger with feelings "as if they would explode" and "of being overwhelmed by their emotions." Anger may also be associated with action tendencies such as "feeling like behaving aggressively" and "letting go." Actions characteristic for anger are "saying something nasty" and "complaining," and typical emotional goals are "wanting to hurt someone" and "wanting to get back at someone" (p. 379). In service settings, anger, of course, may escalate

and produce aggressive or even violent behavior. According to Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, and Christensen (2007), consumer reactions to service failure depend on their cultural model. These models can be divided into three different types: relational, oppositional, and utilitarian. Customers with an oppositional cultural model were reported to evoke a consistently aggressive position toward service providers. Managerial diagnostics used to identify this customer group were overly demanding behavior, aggressiveness, and willingness to fight. Without any model or training of behavior to tackle such extreme situations, the service personnel are, without doubt, in trouble.

Bailey and McCollough (2000) relate the "difficult customer" type to emotional labor, which involves the job-related task of portraying a positive, cheerful, or even friendly emotional disposition to all customers, including even the most unfriendly ones (p. 51). In their conceptualization, a high degree of emotional labor is required in order to perceive a customer as difficult. Bailey and McCollough (2000) use Morris and Feldman's (1997) four subdimensions of emotional labor to conceptualize a difficult customer. The dimensions are: (a) frequency of emotional display, (b) variety of emotions expressed, (c) attentiveness to required display rules, and (d) emotional dissonance. A difficult customer potentially requires more of these emotional elements than a nondifficult customer.

Harari (1996) has labeled the extreme customer type in an escalated negative service situation as "customers from hell." Such customers and service situations are the most extreme form, which contain all negative elements a customer may have in service settings (such as feeling furious, extreme anger, or even willingness to hurt other customers). Harari distinguishes between "customers who have gone through hell" and customers from hell. The groups are different even though they look alike. The reason for the former behavior may be the result of an unsatisfied service experience or inadequate response to a customer complaint. This customer group is important to companies, as they articulate what more silent but dissatisfied customers have experienced, pointing out the flaws in the business (Harari, 1996). The number of customers of the latter group, customers from hell (i.e., truly malicious or evil), can be assumed to be low. It can also be assumed that demanding customers generally belong to the first group, and the unwelcome customer behavior is an effect caused by previous service experiences.

In recent years, the interface between service organizations and their customers has received increasing attention and an important aspect is the fact that customers are more and more seen as partaking in the processes of producing the service they seek (Lachman, 2000). As co-producers, customers take part in delivery processes by interacting with the staff, thus producing the service jointly. Lachman (Ibid, p. 619) notes that this may, however, result in managerial problems as it is difficult for service companies to control, correct, or fulfill their offerings without the work efforts from customers. One can claim that customers have become a necessity, also from the service

producing point of view. At the same time, service processes in many professional services have become more complex, and it is not reasonable to expect the customers to carry major responsibilities in producing the service. Their role should be restricted to a supporting role. As a result, Lachman (2000) suggests that "the consequences for the service encounter are different when clients serve as co-producers rather than partial producers of a service" (Kelley, Donnelley, & Skinner, 1990). Within the service-logic debate (Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Xie, Bagozzi, & Troye, 2008), the customers' role in service creation and production has been discussed. According to Vargo and Lusch (2008), customers can be determined as co-creators of value within service production. The emphasis is on the collaborative nature of value creation and the co-producer aspect of a customer was seen as a part of value creation role of the customer.

Services literature contains several classification attributes for demanding customer encounters that typically include elements like personnel intensity, the level of standardization in replying to service failures, and the level of social interaction in order to illustrate the service company's customer service environment (Fisk, Brown, & Bitner, 1993; Grönroos, 2000). Many scholars seem to agree that company responsiveness plays a vital role. According to Davis and Manrodt (1996), it improves the fit between customer needs and delivery. They argue that "responsive organizations are able to provide higher levels of customer satisfaction and customer retention, decreased costs and greater responsiveness to competitive and environmental change" (Ibid., p. 61). One can also claim that responsiveness can be seen as a two-way highway in which output is always dependent on the input. Rytting (2007) has highlighted the fact that the customers should be seen as a much more active party in all encounters (Hoffman & Bateson, 2002; Lovelock & Wright, 1999; Schneider & Bowen, 1995).

Grönroos (2000) emphasizes the relational character of services. A service encounter is always a process, and in that process, both the service provider and the customer(s) are present, interacting with each other. "If several encounters follow each other in a continuous or discrete fashion, a relationship may emerge" (Ibid., p. 7). Grönroos also emphasizes the fact that service encounters create value for customers (Ibid., p. 372). In addition, Kellogg, Youngdahl, and Bowen (1997) strongly embrace the usefulness of value perspective for exploring the phenomenon of customer participation in a service delivery:

> The tendency in the literature has been to treat customer participation as an input to the service firm's mix of production resources. We encourage treating customer participation as a variable in the customer's own value equation. Doing so creates a rich set of implications in marketing human resources and operations, both for researchers and managers. (p. 217)

In other words, service encounters form the very core of activities in service companies; the total offering of a company consists of numerous micro-episodes and is, therefore, more fragmentary than most scholars tend to think. This fragmentary character easily becomes a managerial problem as everyday situations vary and tend to be unpredictable. Baron et al. (1996) emphasize the importance of observable oral participation and conclude that "staff training and customer care programs concentrate on the provision of consistent, internally understood procedures for managing such interactions. In contrast, service organizations make little effort to directly control the oral contributions of customers in the front stage." While a lot of emphasis has been laid on contact personnel behavior, customer behavior has been more or less neglected. As the relative importance of customers is constantly on the increase, it is obvious that much more research in that area is needed.

Kaminski and Martin (2000) study police officers and they present a potential correlation between a service person's experience and encounter style. They suggest that over the years more experienced officers develop their own physical and/or verbal techniques for handling resistive and potentially violent encounters and, therefore, find the official methods less appealing. Alternatively, older officers may be somewhat less active in the field than younger officers, which results in less need to use the physical techniques they learned at the academy or during their in-service training. In terms of training and development, it seems that older or more experienced officers have somewhat different training needs than younger officers, and further probing could inform trainers as to what these needs are. These findings could eventually be applied to other fields, but keeping in mind that personal growth and learning take place over the years in handling demanding customer encounters.

Another challenging dimension in demanding customer encounters is their versatile and multilayered character; no encounter is identical. Furthermore, the communication that takes place during encounters tends to be a mixture of verbal and nonverbal communication. Burgoon, Dunbar, and Segrin (2002) have investigated nonverbal influence, and they point out that "non-verbal behaviors can provide subtle, but easily recognizable, cues that signal the norms and expectations of the interaction partners" (p. 460). They also conclude that:

> Socially skilled individuals, who are typically also viewed as attractive and dominant, are more capable of picking up on those cues and determining when to violate or conform to the expectancies. The ability to assess the situation and choose the appropriate behavior is a key component of effective compliance gaining. (p. 462)

An additionally challenging aspect in demanding customer encounters is the potential role conflict of contact personnel (Baron et al., 1996; Bateson,

1992). A role conflict may occur if contact personnel are required to play an artificial role in the service encounter. Such potential role conflicts are highlighted by the fact that many service organizations are moving towards an empowerment approach to service delivery in which employees are encouraged to do what is necessary to satisfy their customers (Baron et al., 1996). Contact personnel are often seen as playing a critical "boundary spanning role" in the encounter: they are often psychologically and physically as close to customers as they are to other employees (Ibid., p. 79; Adams, 1976). Furthermore, contact personnel are often encouraged to take a role of "relationship managers" in one-to-one customer exchanges (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). The purpose of this role is to have a greater impact on the customers' perceptions of the quality of the service provided (Baron et al., 1996). These potential role conflicts easily become questions of personal morals and ethics. In earlier literature, relatively many experienced service professionals emphasize the importance of being honest and telling the truth during service encounters. From the company point of view, developing such long-term credibility overruns the potential short-term benefits (Costigan, 2006).

It is obvious that customers have a range of varying roles in demanding customer encounters (Baron et al., 1996; Brown, Fisk, & Bitner, 1994; Harris, 1993). The roles vary considerably depending on service settings and customers, but traditional services marketing literature on service encounters has almost exclusively focused on the role of the employee. Some degree of socialization among customers may take place as they observe each other and "learn" from more experienced customers (Baron et al., 1996).

> This kind of nature of customer interaction suggests that customers may be in a position to supplement, or supplant, personal selling efforts by employees in stores. Alternatively, they may provide an additional interactive dimension to retail offers which are predicated on a self-service basis. (p. 82)

Generally, however, customers most likely perceive other customers as more trustworthy and credible than contact personnel. Other customers should, therefore, be seen as a potential source of positive input in demanding customer situations.

As customer encounters are always based on cooperation between customers and contact personnel, much more energy should be devoted to achieve a mutually satisfying experience in which both parties have a full understanding of what is expected from them. Furthermore, contact personnel should possess enough product/service knowledge in order to know what to offer to every customer. Grönroos (2007) points out that:

> Thus, in service encounters the core service, facilitating services and supporting services of the basic service package are perceived in various

> ways, depending on the accessibility of the services, how easily and well the interactions are perceived, and how well customers understand their role in the service production process. (p. 190)

Finally, as Bateson (1992) puts it, one could expect some sort of a shift of control in service encounters so that an increase in "perceived control" of the customer would be true. Such a shift could only take place following a complete re-evaluation of the traditional roles of customers and contact personnel. In what follows, we take a closer look at one potential framework that offers support for contact personnel in demanding customer encounters.

The Verbal Judo Approach as a Tool in Demanding Customer Encounters

One of the interpersonal techniques used in police force training in the U.S. is VJ. Developed by George Thompson based on his experiences as a police officer and professor of English, this training system focuses on using the following communicative means: (a) pre-determined steps, (b) scripted phases, (c) responses that deflect insults, (d) showing and expressing empathy, and (e) gaining compliance through personal appeals (Thompson & Jenkins, 1993; Johnson, 2004). In the U.S., the VJ approach has predominantly been used in the police force, whereas in Europe, the method has been applied in other services as well.

The VJ framework contains certain characteristics distinguishing it from other more traditional methods aimed at handling negative and demanding customer situations in the service industry. Firstly, VJ has its roots in the oriental martial art of judo, which has its origins in Japan in the late nineteenth century. The word itself means a *gentle way*. The philosophy behind judo emphasizes gentleness, softness, suppleness, and even easiness. The sport is characterized by indirect use of force and redirection of the opponent's force. The word judo also has a more spiritual meaning of *road* or *path*, which suggests a philosophical way of life so that its practitioners seek higher levels of skills and harmony of mind in all areas of life. Examined from this philosophical angle, VJ fits well with the worldview of the services marketing framework: respecting opponents, using indirect actions to influence others, and a more basic search of mental harmony. All of these are valuable goals in service encounters.

Secondly, VJ trainers typically have extensive backgrounds both in the martial arts and police service. They most likely can demonstrate a larger variety of challenging situations than persons who have not faced and solved a number of verbally or physically hostile situations. Thirdly, the main principles of VJ have been used and tested in daily police work in the U.S., where demanding "customer" situations often take more extreme forms than in other more typical service industries (see Johnson, 2004).

In short, VJ addresses two larger areas of frontline service work. First, it strongly highlights the use of empathy in demanding customer situations. As a philosophy, it is relatively strict in demanding customer management; frontline service clerks are encouraged to show empathy with all customer types, even with extremely demanding customers. In other words, service personnel have to "pay a price" to manage demanding service situations. This price means not showing their own (most likely) negative feelings in service settings and being sometimes willing to swallow their pride. Second, the VJ approach addresses and coaches the use of nonverbal communication elements: eye contact, body movement, the use of hands, facial gestures (smiling, eye contact), and the tone of voice in service settings. These elements are to be used in ways which avoid portraying hostile images towards customers.

The first VJ element, empathy, is undoubtedly an important component in service quality (Parasuraman, Valerie, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988; Johnston & Michel, 2008). There is some evidence that customers are more satisfied and less likely to complain while they are treated with empathy (Hocutt, Bowers, & Donavan, 2006); therefore, a staff devoted to show empathy may considerably benefit service companies.

Increasing attention has been paid to how employees express emotions in a range of work-related settings (Morris & Feldman, 1997). The term emotional labor points to acts of expressing organizationally desired emotions during service transactions, and emotional dissonance refers to a situation in which employees have to hide their personal feelings because of organizational rules, such as showing positive emotions to angry customers (Ibid, p. 258). Such situations are generally thought to be stressful to employees and increase the likelihood of burnout at work. VJ strongly emphasizes displays of empathy, even in extremely difficult customer situations that may lead to emotional dissonance. Alternatively, VJ can offer a sense of being able to cope with demanding customer situations, which in turn may have an opposite effect in frontline service personnel work. It is possible to positively affect a customer's affective state with an empathetic service approach: recent empirical research has confirmed that a service provider's positive emotional display can prompt a corresponding change in a consumer's affective state (Dallimore et al., 2007; Wei-Chi, 2001).

The second area of VJ addresses nonverbal communication. Even though emotions are typically communicated both verbally and nonverbally, nonverbal components tend to dominate during a service interaction (Dallimore et al., 2007). Nonverbal communication may be intentional or unintentional, and it is a part of the rapid stream of communication that passes between two individuals (Gabbot & Hogg, 2000). In its broad sense, nonverbal communication encompasses a number of aspects of body language, including facial expressions, eye contact, posture, gestures, and the perceived interpersonal distance. According to Gabbot and Hogg (2000), it also includes a number of factors associated with the delivery of speech like

loudness and intonation (Ibid, p. 384). The VJ approach addresses the majority of these nonverbal communication elements.

On the whole, VJ is a system with three explicit goals: (a) developing mind-mouth harmony, (b) enhancing professionalism, and (c) increasing personal efficiency by increasing the performance level (Thompson & Jenkins, 1993). In addition, as the writers point out, control of one's actions is of importance: "When we employ the words that naturally come to our lips, we run the risk of giving the greatest speech we'll ever live to regret" (Ibid, p. 71). Additionally, the use of "strip phrases" and paraphrasing are strongly recommended. This technique is relevant mainly in the U.S., as in most parts of Europe the cultural frames and expectations do not support the use of strip phrases and paraphrasing. Strip phrases are used to deflect the insults coming from contact persons, thus allowing them to focus on what they are doing (Ibid, p. 74). Paraphrasing, on the other hand, simply means putting another person's meaning into one's words and delivering it back to them (Ibid, p. 79).

Practical applications of VJ are numerous. For instance, Berckhan (2001) presents VJ as a system of self-defense. She combines her experiences as a trainer of communication and the principles of Asian martial arts. In her terminology, VJ aims at fending off attacks and restoring peace rather than continuing the fight. She emphasizes the importance of a powerful appearance since preferred victims of verbal attacks are those who appear to lack personal power. She also presents a training program that is designed to help the reader to internalize the strategies that are presented.

The uses of VJ have also been subjected to scholarship. Johnson (2004) tests the tenets of VJ against citizens' expectations of what is fair and respectful behavior. The study consists of a survey conducted among young adults in order to determine their perceptions of some of the elements of VJ. The findings generally support the basic principles of the VJ traffic stop procedure and suggest some important variations by race and sex that could eventually be incorporated into future police training. Kaminski and Martin (2000) have analyzed police training, and found relatively little interest in verbal tactics. Raffel (2005) emphasizes the importance of communication, especially in investigating crimes and solving day-to-day problems. The concept of VJ is mentioned as a way of legitimizing physical force: "Giving verbal commands can increase the intensity of the hits while reducing their duration" (Ibid, p. 91). In our approach, we see VJ as a holistic system of interpersonal communication—not a component used with physical force.

METHODS

The empirical research was conducted in June 2007 and it consisted of qualitative one-to-one and focus group interviews. We interviewed 24 frontline

service personnel of a major Finnish passenger shipping company that operates daily ferry traffic between Finland and Sweden. This group is made up of 19 women and 5 men, and their average working experience is 10.5 years; two of the participants are managers. The interviewees represent the company's land service personnel whose principal responsibilities are related to check-in activities. Currently, this personnel group is, in most cases, the first face-to-face contact between customers and the ferry company, as an increasing number of customers will likely book their trips via the internet in the future. The empirical material was collected after a VJ training session at the shipping company premises. The interviewees were divided into two focus groups, both with six persons. The remaining personnel were interviewed separately on a one-to-one basis.

Seven discussion themes derived from Bailey and McCollough (2000) were used in order to measure how the interviewees perceived their customers, with a special emphasis on demanding customer typologies—the actions they had taken when confronting demanding customers, and how demanding situations had affected their daily service work. Another discussion topic dealt with the VJ training and its attributes; its themes were designed in cooperation with Mielenrauha Oy [Peace of Mind, Ltd.] and the President, Mr. Totti Karpela, a leading VJ instructor in Europe. At the end, the participants filled out a short questionnaire. The interviews, each lasting between 30 to 60 minutes, were taped.

Our analysis follows the questionnaire themes, derived from our theoretical discussion. A loosely defined "start list" type of code list was created and used as the basis for response analysis. The main themes of our analysis are as follows: (a) the demanding customer profile, (b) the frontline personnel's attitudes and behavior towards demanding customers, and(c) the VJ framework in demanding customer situations. We use these main themes as the basis for our data analysis. This kind of approach is generally considered suitable in order to avoid data overload and to limit the number of formed categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

FINDINGS

The Demanding Customer Profile

Typically customers are considered to be nice, but the range of customer types and their behaviors is wide. The duration of travel seems to affect customer segments, since on weekdays the customers are different compared with those travelling on weekends.

The interviewed frontline personnel confront demanding customer groups daily. During a typical workday, a service clerk confronts at least one more or less difficult customer. The following are actual responses,

originally in Finnish and translated into English by the authors: "Yes, daily [difficult customers]," "Quite often," and "Every second day."

How do personnel define demanding customers? Our interviewees think that physically aggressive behavior is clearly linked more to men than to women, whereas women tend to confront service personnel verbally more often than men.

Demanding customer profiles are clearly related to the customers' emotional states. The interviews suggest that in many instances, the customers had been in a bad mood even before entering the service situation. Pre-service incidents had brought about negative emotional states for customers:

> Everything had gone wrong at the customers' home before coming to the terminal, the kids had been behaving badly and they were running late in everything they'd done . . .
>   Quite seldom is it so that the customer will get real angry without being somehow in a bad mood beforehand.

In some instances customers get angry or even resort to aggressive behavior. Typically, angry customers yell or at least raise their voices when speaking to service personnel.

General or specific disappointment seems to be one cause for customers' demanding behavior. For one reason or another, customers' expectations are not fulfilled; they may have misunderstood something when making the reservation and this misunderstanding may then lead to negative behavior at the check-in:

> At the telephone sales service, the clerks had promised a customer a certain cabin on a certain deck. At the check-in situation it turns out than the customer cannot get a cabin on that particular deck or that there are no cabins on that deck. . ., which can be very difficult for a customer to understand that. . . . Sometimes customers imagine that something has been promised to them, even though this has not been the case.

Modern reservation systems based on self-service can bring about customer disappointments. When a customer reserves a trip by him/herself through an online reservation system, it is possible that the customer is responsible for potential mistakes. Like Bitner et al. (1994) point out, a customer can be the source of their dissatisfaction, which may lead to the service personnel telling the customer of the real source of that mistake. Such an option is likely in cases in which the service personnel possess a print document about the incident. Considering customer service quality, this course of action is not, however, the best one.

> . . . And then we have this customer group which has problems with the Internet booking system. They then come and yell that this is your

> mistake . . . but it is quite easy to respond to that when I say that look, you have done this by yourself!
>
> We have it in black and white and the customer also has the same document; it is easy to read the reservation details from the paper.
>
> Then they say that it is the system's mistake . . .

The interviewees tell that a small number of demanding customers are under the influence of alcohol. This industry-specific feature is typical in the passenger ship industry, as passengers may be in a "good mood" even before entering the ship, and is may cause problems in service situations. Previous studies have also pointed out the positive correlation of alcohol and customer misbehavior. Reynolds and Harris (2006), in their restaurant industry-related study, even argue that a small part of frontline personnel may consume alcohol or other drugs in order to prepare them to confront deviant customer behavior. In our study, however, we found no evidence of such illegal behavior: Alcohol was considered to be a problem only among customers.

Frontline Service Personnel and Demanding Customers

Service personnel naturally prefer to work with ordinary, well-behaving customers. When they have to deal with demanding customers, it seems to influence the employees' emotional state. The duration of this impact seems to vary.

> I have to say that, although I have been working in this company for twenty years, after a customer has been yelling at me, the rest of my day is spoiled.
>
> I think it usually takes a couple of hours to forget an angry customer.

Moreover, angry or demanding customers may influence the contact employees' attitudes towards other customers (see also Rafaeli (1993), who argues that the behavior of one customer can set the tone for an employee's interaction with all subsequent customers).

> It is difficult to be nice to the next customer when you are like oh-oh [after a negative customer encounter].

The emotional state can, however, improve relatively quickly. Like Wei-Chi (2001) reports, customers can receive positive emotions from the employees and vice versa.

> When a nice customer comes, my feelings get better immediately.
>
> One nice customer may change my feelings to be more positive.

After a difficult customer encounter, frontline personnel may need to discuss the incident. A natural conversation partner seems to be one's

co-worker, and the interviewees point out that negative customer experiences were typically not discussed at home.

> Yes, I discuss negative incidents with my co-workers.
> I discuss the matter with my colleagues, not at home. Typically employees discuss the matter directly after the incident.
> It feels stupid to discuss the matter the next day.

Help from other colleagues is occasionally used as a consultation tool in solving a challenging customer situation, but a difficult customer very rarely moves over to another service clerk. Every one of our interviewees feels responsible for their own customer situations, and only occasionally a manager may be asked to enter the situation. The impulse for manager intervention usually comes from the customer. It is rare that the service clerk calls a manager without customer request. Calling for a manager to solve a problem related to a difficult situation is also reported in Bailey and McCollough (2000) as one of the strategies for frontline personnel to cope with difficult situations.

> It is very rare that I ask, for example, Mika [a manager] to take over a [difficult] customer situation.
> That I would say to a customer with whom I am not having a pleasant discussion that could you please discuss the matter with a colleague … It simply doesn't happen.

The service process blueprint and all written instructions give guidelines of what to actually do in a challenging situation with demanding customer(s). In this sense, service blueprints facilitate the service personnel's work in such customer situations.

> But then the company has certain rules, or at least one should have those, and in my opinion one should act according to these. These rules help employees and also managers to work so that one knows when to be flexible and when not to. It is good that these rules give guidelines to service work.
> Then, for example, when the cars are checked in to a ferry, one can tell [to a demanding customer] that the service policy of the company guides the course of action.

The Verbal Judo Framework in Demanding Customer Situations

In general, the interviewees felt that the VJ approach could offer tools and ideas to tackle demanding customer situations.

Suitable for us.
> Rapidly applicable to service situations.
> This opens up new insights.

The whole VJ philosophy rests heavily on respect and empathy, even when customers are nasty or angry. At the VJ training sessions, the participants were taught to "pay the price to calm down the customer in order to address the importance of empathy." The interviewees widely accepted the principle:

> Yes, I think that we all need to learn more about empathy.
> ...To see things from the customer's point of view...

However, the use of empathy raises some doubts among the service personnel. While the basic principle and the values of being empathetic towards a customer are seen as important, it may be difficult to show that in real service encounters. This is especially true in demanding customer situations.

> It depends on a customer. If a customer behaves well, it is easy to show empathy.
> It is difficult to be empathetic towards customers, and it becomes more and more difficult as you gain more experience...

The VJ training guides the use of body language and elements like facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice. Moreover, general attitude and control in demanding service situations were trained in VJ sessions. The interviewees think that body language, and the elements of facial expressions in particular, are effective tools in demanding customer situations. Both customers and personnel can quickly show their feelings with the help of their facial movements. For example, wide open eyes or intensive staring were thought to decrease the level of frustration on both sides of customer service situations.

> You can easily notice that if you spend more time serving one customer, someone in the line takes a deep breath, and..., yes even someone way back in the line may start staring at you, kind of asking what's the problem there...

Tone of voice is also applicable in service situations in which customer contact time is limited. Gestures, such as a service clerk playing with keys or a pencil when serving a customer, convey negative messages to the customer.

> Well, you quite often play with your pencil or keys in difficult customer situations.

The frontline service personnel interviewed emphasize the general attitude and empathy as critical elements when dealing with demanding customer groups. When service clerks confront several demanding customers a day, it may be hard to show empathy to all such customers. In addition, the more experienced service personnel seems to feel that it is hard to show empathy towards customers. One reason might be that one acquires certain habits and rhythm when working with customers and there is no willingness to break those habits. Demanding customers need more time and that may break the customer service rhythm. It seems to be easier for service personnel with less experience to show empathy in customer service.

The interviewees feel that because their typical service tasks only involve limited time per customer, the VJ principles only have limited possibilities to affect customer encounter experiences. They also feel that the VJ type of framework might be more beneficial in service situations in which the interaction takes place over a longer timeframe. One example mentioned is airline cabin crews.

It seems to be obvious that the service timeframe causes problems in the applicability of VJ principles, as one of the core principles is that one should spend more time with a demanding customer—perhaps even taking the customer aside in order to discuss the problem in more detail. While this principle makes sense in theory, it may be difficult to apply the principle in a typical service context explored here since the number of customers is relatively high and the customer flow constant.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to discuss demanding customer situations and investigate the suitability of a framework called VJ as an approach to help contact service personnel to cope with such demanding customer situations. The results indicate that the VJ framework, which has its roots in police work in the U.S., could offer some fresh insights to service personnel in handling demanding situations. Currently, service marketing literature offers limited guidance on an operational level of how to act in difficult and demanding situations.

More and more people in all areas of work today face an increasing number of verbal or physical violence, and this study supports the view that demanding and norm-breaking customer behavior is common (Reynolds & Harris, 2006). All service organizations should take this trend into consideration when designing and managing service offerings. Moreover, this phenomenon should not only be analyzed from the service recovery (e.g., Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996), customer switching or customer satisfaction perspectives. Instead, the focus should also be on the frontline personnel's

possibilities and capacities in coping with demanding customer situations, preventing stress and in managing and improving the overall well-being of personnel.

The interviews show that customer misbehavior has a long-lasting impact on frontline employees. In the worst case, the entire day is ruined by a single demanding customer incident which may have a direct impact on both the service quality and the clerk's personal well-being. One has to recover mentally from a demanding customer situation before being able to offer high quality service to other customers.

It is equally clear that service organizations may benefit from recognizing angry customers and developing employee skills to cope with angry customers (Bougie et al., 2003). According to our research, the VJ framework could offer frontline service personnel the tools to cope with difficult situations that they may face in their daily tasks. The empirical part of our study offers evidence that even senior service clerks with long experience in this business found new ideas in handling demanding and/or angry customers. Their extensive knowledge of managing difficult situations may be increased through training, thus improving their job satisfaction and general level of work motivation.

A broad theme of this study relates to service process design. In marketing literature, there is some discussion concerning the degree of service process standardization versus adaptation; very few authors favor rigid and standardized process blueprints in customer service, but most authors recommend less rigid and adaptive approaches in service settings in general, that is, "empowerment." Typically empowerment is regarded positively when developing service organizations. Many authors have suggested that the key to effective service recovery is the empowerment of frontline staff (Thwaites & Williams, 2006). This approach is also usually seen as an effective buffer against stress and a method that tends to improve frontline employee performance (Yagil, 2006). Our study suggests, however, that in order to manage demanding customer situations, frontline personnel should be provided with rigid service process blueprints on how to operate in such situations. These blueprints should not only offer general operational guidelines but also define the termination point for service in case the situation becomes unnecessarily difficult. At that time some additional actions, like calling for help, should be incorporated into the process. In police work, the final outcome can sometimes be the use of physical force, which is naturally not the case in normal service delivery. In terms of service management, instead of solely relying on the personal competence of employees, it is important to emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication and to develop company-specific standardized procedures aimed at helping employees to manage demanding situations.

This study has revealed a number of issues related to demanding customer behavior, all of which could act as a basis for future research. First,

demanding customer behavior seems to differ by gender. Additionally, pre-service incidents may act as a source of customer misbehavior. There is a clear need to investigate the gender differences in more detail, and the focus of future research should be placed on pre-service incidents. Secondly, the present study focuses on the passenger cruise ship industry in particular, so the demanding customer situations presented here may include some industry-specific features. Therefore, a cross-industry approach should most likely offer new insights of this phenomenon.

Moreover, this study examines the personnel group's experiences and behavior, which is characterized by a short person-to-person interaction time. Demanding customer encounters in service situations with a longer duration should also be investigated in order to find out the impact of the service encounter duration on the interaction behavior. A longer duration may lead into an adjustment of the interaction styles of both parties.

Looking into the future, we can see a clear scenario in which VJ elements are integrated into service processes, which on a regular basis may be described as challenging. As VJ is strongly dependent on human communication, it has to be covered as a separate topic in personnel training. Moreover, one can assume that certain people are more ready for a VJ approach. If such is the case, VJ skills may set new standards for recruitment processes as well. In all, we consider VJ as one possible way to increase communicative professionalism in demanding customer encounters and in that role VJ may be seen as a framework and training approach that helps the management to drive improvements throughout the entire service organization.

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