

# **The Influence of Front Liner's Personality Types on Developing Customer Orientation Behaviour: A look at Malaysian Hotel Industry**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent research investigating customer-orientation behaviour has indicated that greater attention needs to be focused on the influence of personality types as antecedents influencing customer-orientation behaviour. In the context of service employees, customer-orientation behaviour refers to the employee's tendency or predisposition to meet client's need in the job context. This type of behaviour has become a prime variable of interest for service organization wishing to market and promote good quality of services to the clients. This study explores the influence of two personality types on customer-orientation behaviour, that is self-efficacy and self monitoring. Hypothesized relationships are tested using survey responses from a sample of 148 hotel front liners in Malaysia. Results revealed a positive relationship between self monitoring and self efficacy and customer-orientation behaviour. Results are compared with earlier findings and implications for future research are discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Now days in the hotel industry, the hoteliers are fighting intensely to get more guests and to retain their guest. Therefore, there is a constant pressure among hoteliers to innovate and develop new ways to improve the number of their guests. Variety of marketing strategies are implemented by hoteliers in order to become more competitive. Ultimately, the success of any marketing strategy implemented by hoteliers is determined by the satisfaction of guests needs (Poon & Low, 2005).

In marketing service such as in hotel industry, the delivery of service occurs when the interaction between service providers and the service encounter (Ki Lee et al., 2006). In relation to that, in delivering services to the guests, hoteliers must depend on customer-contact employees, known as front liners to deliver service to their customers. Apart from cleanliness, comfort, spacious and well-maintained room, safety, security and room facilities, the quality of services given by the front liners such as prompt and courteously services is another critical issue that clients look for and use as evaluation cues in choosing the hotels that they will stay in (Poon & Low, 2005; LeBlanc & Nguyen, 1996). This indicates that front line employees play an important role that links the hotel with its guests and thus in building relationships. Owing to this important role, hotels must find ways to effectively manage their front liners in order to ensure that their behaviours are conducive to the delivery of quality service. One of the various ways which has been emphasized by hoteliers to improve quality of services is by promoting the front liners to behave in a customer-oriented manner (Kim & Cha, 2002).

A review of work in the area of customer-orientation indicates only limited research has examined the underlying factors that contribute to this type of behaviour, particularly in service organization. To date, this research has focused on situational and organizational variables which have been shown to influence the development of customer-orientation behaviour. For example, market-orientation of the organization in a business-to-business setting is positively related to customer-oriented behaviour (Boles et al., 2001; Siguaw et al., 1994), supportive work environment (Babin & Boles, 1996). Unfortunately, managers do not yet have clear understanding of which, if any, individual personality types that may influence customer-orientation behaviour among employees (O'Hara et al., 1991, Widmier, 2002). This is important because identifying this factors affecting customer-orientation behaviour can help managers in the recruiting and training of the employees.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Apart from organizational and work environment factors, another area of research that have been frequently cited in customer-orientation behaviour studies is individual differences factors. According to Brown and Peterson (1993), individual differences factors include both demographic and personality variables related to individual employees. As customer-orientation behaviour involves individual employees, there are substantial number of studies that have examined the influence of personal-related factors such as gender (Busch & Bush, 1978; Levy & Sharma, 1994; Palmer & Bejou, 1995; Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995), job tenure (O'Hara et al., 1991; Shoemaker & Johlke, 2002; Widmier, 2002), level of education (Boles et al., 2000; Lamber, Marmorstein & Sharma, 1990), job satisfaction (Hoffman & Ingram, 1991; Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2002; Stock & Hoyer, 2002), motivational levels (Boles et al., 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hoffman & Ingram, 1992; Kelly, 1992; Pullins et al. 2000; Sujan, 1986) and various types of personality factors (Brown et al., 2002; Davis, 1983; Hogan, Hogan & Busch, 1984; Hurley, 1998; Spivey, Munson and Locander, 1979) as antecedents of customer-orientation behaviour.

From demographic perspective, Busch and Bush (1978) for instance have shown that women when compared to their male counterparts place greater value on their relationships with customers. Women are regarded to be better listeners and better at developing interdependent and ongoing relationship (Levy & Sharma, 1994) and are found more likely to serve as problem-solving consultants and to assist their customers in achieving their goals rather than just attempting to make the sale regardless of customers' needs (Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995). Beside gender, job tenure defined as the length of time one has worked for his or her current company (Ingram & Bellenger, 1983) has also been linked with customer-orientation. They found that the longer the employee's job tenure, the more experienced the employee has with the company. With such experience, they are better able to "read" the working environment and adjust their behaviour and developed greater product-related knowledge that they can utilize with customers.

Compared to gender and job tenure, studies that examined the educational level and customer-orientation behaviour relationship have received less attention. Boles et al. (2000) have shown that employee who were university graduates develop better interaction with customers, frequently exchanged information with buyers, adopt cooperative style, and gain more respect and trust from customers. However, the study by Lamber et al. (1990) found that highly educated employee tends to be frustrated with repetitive work procedure which therefore reduce their focus on customers. Overall, the influence of demographic factors such as gender, job tenure and education level has been under-research and therefore not much evidence can be used to support the demographic factors and customer-orientation behaviour linkage. Demographic factors seem to be discounted because previous studies have not found consistent relationship between these factors and performance of the employees (Busch & Bush, 1978; Dubinsky & Hartley, 1986; Dwyer, Richard & Shepherd, 1998).

Other research on personal factors concern with the influence of personality on customer-orientation behaviour. Studies such as Brown et al. (2002); Frei and McDaniel (1998); Hogan et al. (1984); Hurley (1998) and Spivey et al. (1979) have explored the relationship between several personality traits such as emotional stability, extroversion, agreeability and need for activity and customer-orientation behaviour. For example, Spivey et al. (1979) and Hurley (1998) found that service workers who are high in emotional stability were found to perform higher customer-orientation behaviour and willing to spend time dealing with customers' needs and satisfaction. Beside that, employees who are extrovert are also reported to reveal higher customer-orientation behaviour (Brown et al., 2002; Hogan et al. 1984; Hurley, 1998; Spivey et al., 1979). Such employees enjoy working with customers and are willing to work with customers long enough to identify and satisfy their needs.

Apart from the variables discussed above, this study focuses on other personality types that is self-efficacy and self monitoring as potential factors influencing employees to behave in a customer-oriented manner. As a key part of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, self efficacy refers to an employee's belief in his or her ability to perform job-related tasks. Self efficacy grows stronger over time as the employee successfully performs tasks and builds confidence necessary to fulfill his or her role in the organization (Hartline & Ferrel, 1996). As self efficacy among the employees increase, they exert more effort, become more persistent and learn to cope with task-related obstacle (Bandura, 1977; Gist, 1987; Hartline & Ferrel, 1996). It is therefore reasonable to predict that employees with high self efficacy are

more likely to create favourable service delivery and able to cope with demanding situations that arise during the service encounter. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Self efficacy is positively related to customer-orientation behaviour of front liners.

Despite a number of personality traits found associated with customer-orientation behaviour, self-monitoring has been chosen as a personality variable to be examined in this study. Self-monitoring refers to social psychological construct related to the propensity to regulate one's self-presentation (Eppler, Honeycutt, Ford & Markowski, 1998). The appropriateness of self-monitoring is further supported by theory of self-monitoring which suggests that those with high self-monitoring are sensitive and responsive to social and interpersonal cues of situational appropriateness (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). The theory of self-monitoring suggests that people who are high in self-monitoring are able to modify self-presentation to match role expectations in different social situations and be aware of the situational cues (Snyder, 1979). Studies conducted have shown that people with self-monitoring personality trait able to increase their ability to read the selling situation and to modify selling behaviour to match customer expectations (Eppler et al., 1998; Spiro & Weitz, 1990). This allows self-monitors to provide appropriate information to customers, thus encouraging a good relationship with customers and contribute to enhance employee's ability to better match customers' needs. Thus, this study hypothesized that:

H2: Self-monitoring is positively related to customer-orientation behaviour.

## METHODOLOGY

Our sample consists of full-time front liners working in various 4 star hotels in northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. Twenty major 4 stars hotels were sent a brief explanation of the study. This was followed up by a telephone call to obtain their cooperation with the research. Of the hotel contacted, eleven were willing to participate in the study. The 400 questionnaires, along with a cover letter were sent to front liners through each hotel. Of these, 154 were returned representing a response rate of 39 percent. In total, 148 questionnaires were deemed useful for data analysis. The front liners were primarily female (72.0%), less than 40 years old (66.4%), acquired the Malaysian Education Certificate (SPM) (83.2%), and have had working experience of less than 3 years in the hotel industry (60.2%). From the discussions in the literature review, the following framework has been constructed. Figure 1 shows that self monitoring and self efficacy will lead to greater front liner's customer-orientation behaviour.

### Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

#### Measuring Instruments

The operationalization of each construct consisted of multi-item scales based on scales typically used in the past studies. Respondents were asked to consider all items on the five point Likert scale ranging from "1=very disagree" to "5=very agree". Cronbach's alpha is most used to test the reliability of a multi-item scale (Kim & Cha, 2002). The cut off point is generally 0.6 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998). For the purpose of this study, a customer-orientation scale by Thomas, Soutar and Ryan (2001) consisting of 10 items was used, but with minor modification in order to fit with the front liners and local setting. The Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.75 was found in the present study, confirming its reliability for this study. To measure self-monitoring, the instrument developed by Snyder (1979) and modified by Snyder and Gangestad (1986) was used. The items were made up of eighteen statements that provide one's perspective on the ability and willingness to modify self-presentation and the sensitivity to expressive behaviours of others. The self efficacy was measured by eight item scale developed by Jones (1986). A reliability coefficient alpha of .87 and 0.63

was found in the present study for self monitoring and self efficacy respectively. The means, standard deviation and reliabilities of these scales are reported in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Reliabilities of Measures**

Variable	M	SD	Reliability
Customer-orientation behaviour	4.45	.45	.75
Self monitoring	4.30	.41	.87
Self efficacy	3.58	.57	.63

Note: N=148

## RESULTS

The stated hypotheses regarding the impact of antecedent factors on customer-orientation behaviour were tested using multiple regression following the guidelines established by Hair et al. (1998). Prior performing the actual hypotheses tests, correlations between the constructs were derived. Table 2 below shows the correlation structure of the data used in this study.

**Table 2: Construct Correlation Matrix**

	Customer-orientation behaviour	Self monitoring	Self-efficacy
Customer-orientation behaviour	1.0		
Self monitoring	.32**	1.0	
Self efficacy	.53**	.22**	1.0

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$

As the table shows, a significant correlation exist between customer-orientation behaviour and self monitoring ( $r=.32$ ;  $p<.01$ ), and self-efficacy ( $r=.53$ ;  $p<.01$ ), suggesting supports for both hypothesized relationship. The individual hypotheses were then tested using a multiple regression prediction model (Hair et al., 1998) with customer-orientation behaviour as the dependent variable. The results obtained as shown in Table 3 revealed that both constructs were found to be significant in the prediction model. The results provide support for hypothesis H1 and H2, that is the relationship between self monitoring ( $\beta=.12$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and self efficacy ( $\beta=.20$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and customer-orientation behaviour.

With F value of 18.83 indicates that both independent variables significantly influencing customer-orientation behaviour. However, the model is weak with all the independent variables explaining only 35 percent of the variation in customer-orientation behaviour.

**Table 3: The Influence of Individual Differences Factors on Customer-orientation Behaviour**

Antecedents	B	SEB	B
Self monitoring	.12	.56	.12**
Self efficacy	.19	.04	.20**

Note:  $R^2=.35$ ;  $F=18.83$ ; Sig.  $F=.00$

\*\* $p < .01$

## DISCUSSION

Several important conclusions emerge from these findings. It can be concluded that antecedents of customer-orientation behaviour are diverse in their nature. In the present study, front liners with self monitoring and self efficacy personality types are found to have higher customer-orientation behaviour.

This study found that front liners who scored high in self-monitoring measures seem to perform higher customer-orientation behaviour. High self-monitors, with more sensitivity and responsiveness to social and interpersonal cues are better to display higher customer-orientation behaviour in their work activity to satisfy customers' needs than those with low self-monitors. This is probably because people who are high in self-monitoring will demonstrate more cross-situational variability in behaviour than people who are low in self-monitoring (Spiro & Weitz, 1990). They are able to tailor their personality to any particular situation. This allows self-monitors to provide appropriate information to which the listeners respond and encouraging a positive feedback in the conversation.

The finding that show positive relationship between self efficacy and customer-orientation behaviour indicates that front liner with high self efficacy tends to perform high customer-orientation behaviour. This is probably because those with high self efficacy tends to become more confident in their ability to serve customers, they become more proactive and persistent, and they put forth greater effort (Hartline & Ferrel, 1996). Consequently, those with high self efficacious may be better able to face the difficulties inherent in their daily jobs, which leads to better performance in delivering services to customers.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Since we are not allowed to contact front liners directly, we relied on the hotel managers to distribute the questionnaires. In the case where the managers did not randomly distribute the questionnaires as instructed, a potential for bias exists (Hartline & Ferrel, 1996). However, throughout the analyzing, we did not encounter any bias as we coded the questionnaires. The sample of respondents was taken from one industry. It has been noted that job attitudes and behaviours may not be congruous across different selling environments (Siguaw & Honeycutt, 1995). Consequently, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all industries. From a methodological standpoint, data in this study were obtained from full-time front liners in the selected hotels. It would be useful to obtain a broader sample of employees and perhaps even part-timers in future studies. This would minimize any potential bias in the data resulting from the level of the job. O'Hara et al. (1991) suggests that customer-orientation behaviour may vary based on other characteristics of the job.

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