

When it's not your job to be friendly with clients

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2016/08/17/when-its-not-your-job-to-be-friendly-with-clients/

8/17/2016



Customer service outrage. The phrase instantly conjures up stories of customers being ripped off, mistreated and rudely dismissed by sales staff. Yet we rarely stop to consider a different side to the story and examine the experiences of the thousands of workers in retail and hospitality, who deal with offensive, intimidating and humiliating treatment from customers on a daily basis. One particularly concerning area here is sexual harassment. Studies across a range of economies have shown that sexual harassment from customers in the service sector as a significant problem, with measures of incidence ranging from 24 per cent of hospitality workers in a New Zealand study ([Poulston, 2008](#)), to 40 per cent of female retail employees in a US study ([Gettman and Gelfand, 2007](#)) and as high as 67 per cent of female retail workers in a Canadian study ([Hughes and Tadic, 1998](#)).

For Nicole* working in an inner-city bar exposed her to 'gross sexual attention' from customers. One in particular, a middle-aged man, would come in regularly and ask only to be served by her.

'He started off as normal and nice so I was friendly and chatted to him. It quickly escalated to the point where he was calling me his angel and bringing me presents. The creepiest part was this time that he stayed at the hotel across the road and got a room overlooking the pub. I looked out at one stage and saw that he was standing at the window not wearing any clothes. I was so creeped out and felt I couldn't escape. It was just so gross and awkward, I didn't know how to react.'

And she is not alone. Our research at the University of Sydney Business School has found that retail and hospitality workers are being propositioned, objectified, ogled at, sworn at, spat on and grabbed by customers. We used a pilot study to examine how employees in the service sector respond to this sexual harassment from customers and to theorise why this is so.

When faced with customer abuse, many employees find themselves unsure of what to do. Our research suggests that their action in response is likely to be informal in nature, such as speaking to a co-worker or line manager, rather than making a written complaint to their boss or making a complaint to an external regulatory body.

We conceptualised the way that employees respond to harassment from customers as processes of 'coping and

contesting'. In a coping response, employees attempt to minimise their engagement with the harasser and depersonalise the situation, even employing emotional labour so as not to aggravate the customer. Humour is used to joke about the harassment as an unpleasant but unremarkable aspect of their job, such as in the case of Cody, a Retail Assistant:

'We kind of would make fun of it together. It would happen all the time to the girls next door as well, they were even more visible from the street ... those sort of guys did come into the shop and they'd come up and say all sorts of stuff and ask girls out all the time, and no one ever followed that up but we'd always joke about it. 'Oh here's your friend, he's coming again'. It was more that kind of 'oh your friend turned up again today, he was after you'. Talked about these regular guys as if they were a bit pathetic but sort of teasing the girls about it too ... it would be more like 'oh he's so creepy' or 'what a loser'.

A contesting process was characterised by employees telling the customer that their behaviour had been inappropriate and unwanted. It drew more on emotions of anger, injustice and a violation of respectful norms of customer service.

So why do these workers respond in such ways? There is an intersection between the social norms of the service sector, and the precarious working conditions of low status-employees in insecure employment. Some employees internalise customer service expectations and prioritise customer demands above their own needs, seeing sexual harassment as a manifestation of the higher status that customers have relative to employees, as articulated by Kevin, an employee in Retail:

'A lot of the time, customers will look down on people who work in the retail industry. I think that is obvious in these [harassment] situations, because a lot of the time the staff then feel that the customer has the right to look down on them in that way. They feel like they're serving this customer and they are indebted to this customer in a way and should have to just deal with whatever the customer says.'

Others simply see complaining as not worth the effort. In our study sample, many of whom were young casuals in their first job with uncertain shifts and anti-social working hours, they primarily viewed their job as temporary and 'not real'. In perceiving their work this way, these employees ignore their experiences and render them invisible to broader society, a nuisance to put up with for a few years until they begin their proper career. This is seen in the case of Isabelle, a Retail Assistant:

'I don't treat the job with any kind of long-term prospects in mind... It's fine, it's not the greatest thing ever, but it's not the worst thing ever... It's just the customers that are the problem, but I won't have to deal with them for much longer so what's the point complaining?'

What can be done? Abusive behaviour against any person must not be tolerated, especially when they are simply trying to do their job. In Australia where this research was conducted, sexual harassment from customers is illegal under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, though the troubling behaviour found in our highlights the need for additional action over and above this legislation. Policymakers can make the issue more visible with awareness-raising and the promotion of best practice. Unions too can raise awareness among their members and work with employers to put clear policies in place. Organisations need to take action on a workplace level, by implementing clear procedures and reducing employee vulnerability through strengthening security measures. Managers must do more to protect workers, by giving them better training on their workplace rights and what to do in uncomfortable situations, as well as stepping in to help them and barring offending customers. Managers have a responsibility to their employees to provide a workplace free from harassment and harm, including harassment from customers.

Sexual harassment from customers must not be conceptualised as part of an employee's job, nor should employees feel left to deal with it alone. More can be done and must be done to address the issue to create workplaces free from all types of harassment.

*Names have been changed.



Notes:

- This post is based on the authors' paper ['But It's Your Job To Be Friendly': Employees Coping With and Contesting Sexual Harassment from Customers in the Service Sector](#), *Gender, Work & Organization*, Volume 23, Issue 5, September 2016, Pages 447–469
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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Laura Good was awarded First Class Honours and the University Medal for her thesis: *Voicing their complaints? Students working in retail and hospitality and sexual harassment by customers*. She graduated from the University of Sydney, majoring in Industrial Relations and Human Resource Management. She has previously worked as a Researcher at the University of Melbourne and Research Assistant at the University of Sydney and now works as a Teacher in regional Victoria, Australia.



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