
Exploring nonstandard service frontline situations

Zoltan Veres, Fanny Liska

University of Pannonia

DOI: 10.15170/MM.2023.57.KSZ.03.08

THE AIMS OF THE PAPER

Jaycustomer behavior often increases the unpredictability of the service to an unmanageable extent. A co-creation based development can be presumed in the attitude of the consumer and of the frontline staff. The primary goal of this research was to investigate the dynamics of interactions between customers and frontline staff, particularly in nonstandard situations. This study aimed to understand how 'jaycustomer' behavior, which includes unpredictable and challenging customer actions, impacts these interactions and the overall service process.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the above, the study employed a quasi-secondary data collection method (narratives, netnography). Frontline conflicts were simulated based on a mystery shopping scenario. Mystery shoppers were instructed to combine two theoretical jaycustomer types – the Belligerent and the Egocentric Edgar (the selfish) – in their approach. These shoppers were tasked with observing various aspects of frontline staff behavior, including reactions, communication, gestures, and problem-solving intentions.

MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS

The simulations led to the identification of distinct behavioral patterns on both sides of the customer-staff interaction. The study highlighted specific jaycustomer oriented patterns and the frontline staff's response strategies. Furthermore, essential human resource management skills in dealing with such jaycustomer scenarios were identified, providing insights into both customer and employee behavior in challenging service situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research offer significant implications for service management and marketing theory, particularly in developing a consensual model for managing frontline processes. Additionally, the study suggests that reviewing and aligning staff training content with these research findings could be a fruitful direction for enhancing human resource management practices in customer service environments. An expert interview conducted post-experiment further affirmed special tasks for frontline management to handle such jaycustomer situations effectively.

Keywords: jaycustomers, service frontline, conflict management

INTRODUCTION

Employee experience has been long ago theorized in services marketing and management – not fully referenced it is to mention Fullerton & Punj (1997), Harris & Reynolds (2003), Subramony & Pugh (2015), Plaskoff (2017), Locoock *et al.* (2020). This is however only a one-sided viewpoint of the frontline. Nowadays the factor of customer experience is becoming increasingly crucial in determining the level of success achieved by a company's offerings (Gentile *et al.* 2007). As Johnston & Kong (2011) suggest it is valuable having well-defined goals in three key areas, namely customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, and cost-efficiency. These objectives can then be utilized to evaluate the advantages of enhancing the customer experience. Research in the field of services, applying the critical incident technique (CIT), suggests that service customers perceive their experiences (service failures or service recoveries) to be primarily influenced by either the service provider, the service employee, or the service customer themselves (Swanson & Kelley 2001, Bitner *et al.* 1990, Kelley *et al.* 1993). It is to mention here, that for example exploratory research of Kókény and Kenesei (2021) proved that „if a customer has a negative interaction with the staff, the overall experience will not be positive even in the case where the physical environment makes a positive influence on the customer during the service consumption”. This means to achieve the successful performance in the frontline is basically the frontstaff competence. The same research confirmed that in the case of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors there are more aspects related to staff (service quality, communication, attitude). Besides based on zero defect policy preventive frontline management can reduce the frequency of compensation (see e.g. Kenesei & Szilvai 2021).

In order to break through the wall between the functional silos of the marketing and the human resource management the study of the situation in a reciprocal approach, i.e. co-creation by customer-frontstaff experience sharing, can be equally interesting. Moreover, the overlapping control area of the marketing and the human resource management justifies the two-way problem interpretation. The research focused on the behavior of jaycustomers and the frontline staff in some nonstandard situations. In non-standard situations, we refer to those nonroutine, non-standardizable situations that are induced by the needs of service recipients that deviate from the usual one in the service process. As the occurrence of adverse critical incidents (CIs) can disrupt the long-term relationships between

actors (van Doorn & Verhoef 2008) the scientific investigation of these situations is an important area.

LITRETURE BACKGROUND

Basic services marketing publications refer to different jaycustomer typologies as follows (e.g. Veres 2021, 266): “Service providers must be prepared for nonstandard behavior of some consumers (Bitner *et al.* 1994).” Lovelock & Wirtz (2004, 251–256.) classify these risky behaviors into the following jaycustomer types:

- the Thief, who does not pay in the restaurant,
- the Deadbeat, who pays late,
- the Rulebreaker,
- the Belligerent, who constantly quarrels with the staff,
- the Family Feuders, who rebels against the provider,
- the Vandal, who does damage.

In this topic also the typology of Zemke & Anderson (1990) is known: Egocentric Edgar (the selfish), Bad-Mouth Betty (the vulgar), Hysterical Harold (who is hysteric), Dictatorial Dick (who is pretentious) and Freeloading Freda (the free rider). These uncertainties often increase the unpredictability of the service to an unmanageable extent.

To step forward with an understanding of the situation a co-creation based development can be presumed in the attitude of the consumer and of the frontline staff. This development can be modeled as a result of the common experience (Chen *et al.* 2012). Taking into account that changing of behavior in the subsequent transactions is equally useful on both sides, experience based co-creation is a source of service quality management (Jäckel 2011).

The purpose and motivation for the study, namely the research goal was exploring the nature of interactions between customers and service frontline personnel in nonstandard situations. Accordingly, the article seeks to find answers to two research questions. First, it aims to examine the dynamics of customer and service frontline personnel interactions in unusual situations. Second, it aims to identify behavioral patterns explored during these incidents.

To formulate research questions:

- How customers and service frontline personnel interact with each other in unusual situations?
- What kind of behavioral patterns could be identified during those incidents? From different secondary and primary sources elements of nonstandard service situations, management of exceptional frontline processes, perceived actions on both sides, outcomes of problem solutions, and lessons for human resource management have been mapped.

METHODOLOGY

In a preparatory phase a quasi-secondary data collection has been conducted from different sources:

- Frontline conflict narratives based on past observations and experiences.

We have collected real, customer and service personnel experiences from various sectors such as restaurants/fast food, cafes, pubs/bars, hair salons/barbershops, beauty salons, and other service sectors. In total, we have gathered 92 descriptive narratives. The storytelling specified the service category, the nonstandard demand of the consumers, and the reaction of the staff in a detailed way.

Besides the following preparatory actions have been performed:

- Knowledge transfer – online learning platforms' training offers – analyzing the supply-side of HR and front staff management related knowledge. A systematic examination was conducted on online educational and training platforms such as LinkedIn, Udemy, Coursera, Skillshare, and edX. The purpose was to identify which platforms offer training programs focused on interactions between frontline personnel and customers in non-standard situations.

- Mystery online research – netnographic research to study online "jaycustomer" culture regarding front staff experience (content analysis of Google, Facebook, and other platforms' customer reviews) recording the following data: service provider, platform of the consumer opinion, text of complaint and service provider's response. We ensured that the information shared by frontline staff is anonymized and protected.

Gaining access to relevant narratives and online communities where frontline staff and/or consumers share their experiences can be challenging. Obtaining permission from participants and ensuring their willingness to share their experiences is crucial. Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data from narratives and netnographic sources can be complex. This study gained meaningful insights and identified patterns by systematically analyzing the textual content of the narratives.

In the field research phase conflicts between jaycustomers and frontline personnel were simulated based on a mystery shopping scenario. The latter has been finalized using the acquired information from the preparatory phase. From among the theoretical jaycustomer types a hybrid combination of the Belligerent and the Egocentric Edgar (the selfish) seemed to be a good base in the experimental simulation.

For the tested services interaction-intensive ones have been selected, like HORECA, beauty service industry, tourism. The conflict situation based on a scenario where in the role of jaycustomers the so-called belligerent and the selfish types have been simulated. The scenario contained the construction of the purchasing process, essential elements and alternatives of the conflict situation, revealing the situation for ethical reasons and the evaluation criteria. When planning the shopping situations it was taken into account that there be common elements in them. This was to make the application of a given system of viewpoints possible during the analysis. Before the action mystery shoppers were instructed to observe the behavior (reactions, communication, gestures, problem solving intention etc.) of the frontline staff. The instructions transmitted to the mystery observers emphasized, that each sign of the staff frustration (for example negative body language, sound effects, secondary communication with other staff members etc.) has to be taken into account. Besides it was expected to record the conflict management phrases used in customer communication. To achieve the highest research efficiency a brief survey and personal interviews followed the on-site observations. The applied questionnaire survey involved the following information: service category, duration, dynamics of staff behavior and efficiency of problem solution etc. The research results were continuously discussed and interpreted together with human resource management experts. Besides the observations of a passive person accompanying the mystery shopper have been also used. As a final research phase an expert in-depth interview with a human resource management specialist has been conducted in order to validate the interpretations.

FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of the research material two sets of results have been gained. On the one hand, a few *behavioral patterns* could be identified on the frontline personnel side, on the other hand jaycustomer oriented human resource management tasks – development of standards and trainings – could be derived.

Frontline conflict narratives

92 stories were collected as a result of a storytelling research, through which the non-standard consumer requests of different industries were analyzed. In the HORECA, beauty services, tourism industry,

customers may have a wide range of nonstandard demands. Some of the most common ones include:

HORECA

- **Special dietary needs:** Customers may have specific dietary requirements due to medical reasons, personal beliefs, or lifestyle preferences. They may request glutenfree, vegan, vegetarian, or low-sodium options.
- **Customization:** Customers may want to customize their order, such as adding or removing ingredients, changing the cooking method, or altering the portion size.
- **Special occasions:** Customers may have special requests for occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, or proposals. They may want a specific table, decorations, or a special menu.
- **Group accommodations:** Customers may have requests for group accommodations, such as a private room, special seating arrangements, or customized menus for large groups.
- **Technology-related requests:** Customers may have requests related to technology, such as providing free Wi-Fi, having charging stations for electronic devices, or providing digital menus.

Beauty

- **Customized services:** Customers may want to customize their beauty services based on their specific needs or preferences. They may want a specific type of facial, hair treatment, or makeup style.
- **Special occasion services:** Customers may have special requests for occasions such as weddings, proms, or other formal events. They may want a specific hairstyle or makeup look that fits with the theme of the event.
- **Accommodation for special needs:** Customers with special needs, such as mobility issues or sensory sensitivities, may require additional accommodation to make the service more comfortable for them.
- **Eco-friendly and organic products:** Customers may have specific preferences for ecofriendly and organic products for their beauty services, such as chemical-free hair dyes or vegan makeup products.

Flexible scheduling: Customers may want flexible scheduling options, such as early morning or late evening appointments, to fit with their busy schedules.

Tourism

- **Customized itineraries:** Customers may want to customize their travel itineraries based on their specific interests or preferences. They may want to visit specific attractions, participate in certain activities, or explore unique cultural experiences.

- **Special occasion services:** Customers may have special requests for occasions such as weddings, honeymoons, or anniversaries. They may want customized travel packages that include romantic activities or special accommodations.

- **Accommodation for special needs:** Customers with special needs, such as mobility issues or sensory sensitivities, may require additional accommodation to make their travel experience more comfortable.

- **Eco-friendly and sustainable travel:** Customers may have specific preferences for ecofriendly and sustainable travel options, such as staying in green hotels or participating in eco-friendly tours.

- **Flexible scheduling:** Customers may want flexible scheduling options for their travel plans, such as early check-in or late check-out, to fit with their travel schedule.

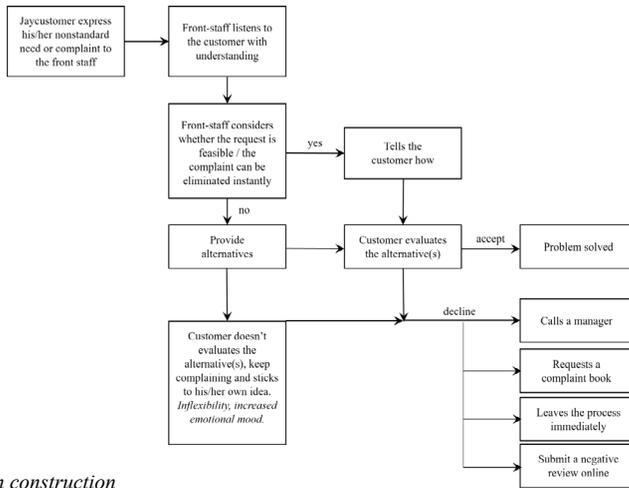
To address these nonstandard demands, service providers can train their staff to be responsive and accommodating to customer requests. They can also be proactive in offering customized options for their services and in offering a range of products or additional services that fit with their customers' preferences (e.g. flexible check-in/check-out system at a hotel). By being responsive to nonstandard demands, service providers can enhance their customer satisfaction and loyalty, leading to increased revenue and positive word-of-mouth.

During the research, it was also examined how the service front-staff responded to individual non-standard customer demands. A general schematic diagram of this reaction process was developed based on the narrative research, which can be seen in the Figure 1.

Netnography

To examine the online landscape, a netnographic research has been conducted to study online "jay-customer" culture regarding frontstaff experience. As Barlow & Møller (1996) suggested, a complaining customer can be a company's most valuable asset. A quasijaycustomer behavior can be identified when someone stays calm and speechless during the service process, but after a negative perception, one writes a stinging criticism online. Such a complaint is a post-service feedback that can be used to prevent the next possibly similar situation. At Google, Facebook, and other platforms' (e.g. Booking, Tripadvisor) customer reviews were examined in the present research, recording the following data: service provider, platform of the consumer opinion, text of complaint and service provider's response. Table 1 below summarizes the top 5 customer complaint topics of HORECA, tourism and beauty services based on online opinions.

Figure 1. Schematic diagram of non-standard service situations between customers and frontline staff



Source: own construction

Table 1. Complaint topics online in the HORECA, tourism and beauty services industry

Industry	Topic	Aspects
HORECA	Service quality	Many customers complained about poor service quality, including slow service, unresponsive staff, and rude behavior.
	Cleanliness and hygiene	Customers often criticized HORECA establishments for poor cleanliness and hygiene standards, including dirty tables, restrooms, and utensils.
	Food quality	A common complaint was about the quality of food served, including undercooked or overcooked dishes, stale food, and incorrect orders.
	Pricing	Some customers complained about the high prices of food and drinks in HORECA establishments, which they felt were not justified by the quality of the offerings.
	Noise levels	Many customers found HORECA establishments to be too noisy, with loud music or conversations making it difficult to have a conversation.
Tourism	Accommodation quality	Many customers have complained about poor accommodation quality, including dirty rooms, uncomfortable beds, and outdated furnishings.
	Customer service	Some customers have reported poor customer service, including unresponsive staff, rude behavior, and language barriers.
	Booking and payment issues	Many customers have experienced difficulties with booking and payment processes, such as overbooking, incorrect charges, and refund delays.
	Location	Some customers have criticized the location of their accommodations, either due to noise levels, lack of accessibility, or distance from popular attractions.
	Amenities	Several customers have expressed disappointment with the amenities provided, such as lack of free Wi-Fi, inadequate parking facilities, and insufficient breakfast options.
Beauty services	Frontstaff behavior	Customers often complain about unfriendly or unprofessional staff who are not attentive to their needs or concerns.
	Quality of service	Customers frequently complain about the quality of the beauty services they receive, such as botched haircuts, color or perm jobs, or unsatisfactory nail treatments.
	Cleanliness and hygiene	Customers are concerned about the cleanliness and hygiene of the beauty salons, including dirty equipment, unsanitary conditions, and lack of proper disinfection protocols.
	Appointment scheduling	Customers may experience issues with scheduling appointments, including difficulty getting appointments, long waiting times, or last-minute cancellations.
	Pricing and billing	Customers sometimes complain about overcharging or hidden fees for services, as well as inaccurate or confusing billing practices.
	Pricing and billing	Customers sometimes complain about overcharging or hidden fees for services, as well as inaccurate or confusing billing practices.

Source: own construction

Knowledge Transfer

Analyzing the supply-side of HR and frontstaff management related knowledge, there are many online learning platforms that offer a wide range of HR-related and frontstaff management trainings. Some of the most popular ones are the followings.

LinkedIn Learning offers courses on a variety of HR-related topics, including employee retention, performance management, and recruitment. They also offer courses on frontstaff management, such as customer service skills, communication skills, and conflict resolution. *Udemy* offers a range of courses on HR management, including HR analytics, talent management, and leadership development. They also offer courses on frontstaff management, such as time management, team building, and customer service. *Coursera* offers HR-related courses from top universities, such as the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Michigan. They offer courses on HR management topics, such as employee engagement, compensation, and benefits, and diversity and inclusion. They also offer courses on frontstaff management, such as effective communication, leadership, and conflict resolution. *edX* offers courses on HR-related topics, including strategic HR management, organizational behavior, and HR analytics. They also offer courses on frontstaff management, such as customer service, effective communication, and team building. *Skillshare* offers courses on frontstaff management, such as customer service, communication, and leadership. They also offer courses on HR-related topics, such as employee engagement and motivation.

These online learning platforms offer a variety of options to learn HR-related and frontstaff management skills. Some courses are free, while others are paid. They offer different formats, including video lectures, assignments, quizzes, and interactive exercises. These courses can be taken at ones' own pace, and most offer a certificate upon completion. By taking advantage of these online learning platforms, individuals can enhance their HR and frontstaff management skills, improve their job performance, and advance their careers.

Mystery Shopping

As for the staff behavior the mystery shoppers and the silent accompanying persons observed roughly the same gestures: with negative character changed tone (higher or lower); rolling of eyes; indignation; seeking help from colleagues while in positive sense forced smile; raising eyebrows (astonishment); persistent kindness; tolerance; helpfulness and solution finder attitude.

Affirming by the post-experiment expert interview following special tasks seem to be useful in the frontline management:

- Collaboration of marketing and HR in the staff selection.
- Staff training in a test environment.
- Conflict case study material in the frontstaff training.
- Measurement-based monitoring system with special attention to conflict solution.
- Implementation of conflict solution skills in the performance evaluation system.
- Cooperation between marketing and HR in frontline process development.
- Managing internal communication on jay-customer experiences as a part of the internal marketing program.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Due to certain ethical concerns in the application of mystery shopping methodology severity of the simulated frontline conflicts must be limited. This can be resulted in a lack of information gained from the experiments. Since the research goal was to explore the dynamics of the frontline conflict situations in a qualitative approach, quantitative generalization of the results is not possible. As a quasi-quantitative result could, however, be gained from the mystery shopping phase if the mystery shoppers are requested to fill out a post-observation questionnaire where the questions focus on certain generalizable elements of the conflict situations. Naturally valid quantifiable conclusion can be drawn only from an adequate number of experiments.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The need for coordination between the two management functions – marketing and human resource - is more significant, if the interaction environment is more intense, and difficulties are growing exponentially when jaycustomers create conflicts. The equivalent of the customer experience is what the frontline staff has to go through in the interactions can be called frontline staff experience.

The studied problem is a direct consequence of the inseparability as it is defined in the HIPI principle. The research offers a possibility for services management and services marketing theory to find a consensual frontline process model. In this model interlocking multiside interactions of the frontline roleplayers can dynamize the classic servuction model.

As a learning for human resource management in internal marketing programs also this experience should be managed on the grounds, that the front-line staff behavior has to be equally professional and customer oriented. Even if customer orientation is a must, nonstandard customer behavior can go beyond a manageable limit, which is extremely risky. Staff behavior in the frontline is greatly determined by their training. The review of the staff training content comparing with the research results a fruitful development direction could be, for example, in the human resource management practice. This latter can be a new, customer oriented approach to an improved specification of the necessary skills in the service frontline.

When a customer presents a nonstandard demand, the proper service management process should aim to meet the customer's needs while also staying within the standard profitable service provision. Some steps can be listed that can be taken to achieve this goal:

1. Listen to the customer: listen carefully to the customer's request and ask questions to clarify their needs. Understand the details of their request and why it is important to them.
2. Determine feasibility: determine if the request can be accommodated within the standard service provision. Assess the impact on the service delivery process, the cost, and the impact on other customers.

3. Provide alternatives: if the customer's request cannot be accommodated within the standard service provision, provide alternatives that meet their needs. For example, if a customer requests a vegan dish but the restaurant does not offer such kind of option, suggest a dish that can be customized to meet their needs

4. Communicate effectively: communicate clearly and transparently with the customer about the options available and any limitations. Provide information on the cost and any additional time required to accommodate the request.

5. Document the request: document the customer's request and the steps taken to accommodate it. This information can be used to improve the service delivery process in the future.

6. Follow up: follow up with the customer after the service has been provided to ensure that their needs were met and they are satisfied with the service.

By following these steps, service providers can meet the customer's needs while also staying within the standard profitable service provision. Effective communication, documentation, and follow-up can help build customer loyalty and trust, leading to increased revenue and positive word-of-mouth.

Finally as a fruitful research direction the jaycustomer-based knowledge transfer of the different HRM training programs could be identified.

Zoltan Veres, PhD, Full Professor
veres.zoltan@gtk.uni-pannon.hu

Fanny Liska, PhD, Assistant professor
liska.fanny@gtk.uni-pannon.hu

University of Pannonia

REFERENCES

- Barlow, J. & Møller, C. (1996), *A complaint is a gift*. Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco (CA)
- Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H., & Mohr, L.A. (1994), "Critical service encounters: The employee's viewpoint", *Journal of Marketing*, 58 (4), 95–106. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1251919>
- Bitner, M.J., Booms, B. H., & Tetreault, M S. (1990), "The Service Encounter: Diagnosing Favorable and Unfavorable Incidents", *Journal of Marketing*, 54 (1), 71-84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1252174>
- Chen, T., Drennan, J., & Andrews, L. (2012), "Experience sharing", *Journal of Marketing Management*, 28 (13-14), 1535-1552. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2012.736876>
- Gentile, C., Spiller, N., & Noci, G. (2007), "How to Sustain the Customer Experience: An Overview of Experience Components that Co-create Value With the Customer", *European Management Journal*, 25 (5), 395-410. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2007.08.005>
- Fullerton, R. A. & Punj, G. (1997), "What is Consumer Misbehaviour?", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 24, 336-339.
- Harris, L. C., & Reynolds, K. L. (2003), "The Consequences of Dysfunctional Customer Behavior", *Journal of Services Research*, 6 (2), 144-161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670503257044>
- Jäckel, K. (2011), "Exploring Frontline Conflicts at Higher Education Institutions", *Delhi Business Review*, 12 (1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.51768/dbr.v12i1.121201101>
- Johnston, R. & Kong, X. (2011), "The customer experience: a road-map for improvement", *Managing Service Quality: An International Journal*, 21 (1), 5-24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09604521111100225>
- Kelley, S. W., Hoffman, K. D., & Davis, M.A. (1993), "A Typology of Retail Failures and Recoveries", *Journal of Retailing*, 69 (Winter), 429-452. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-4359\(93\)90016-c](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-4359(93)90016-c)
- Kenesei, Zs. – Szilvai, Zs. (2016), „Mennyibe kerül egy szolgáltatási hiba? A fogyasztók által elvárt kompenzáció nagyságának vizsgálata”, *Marketing & Menedzsment*, 50 (2), 19-30.
- Kökény, L. – Kenesei, Zs. (2021), „Elvárás-menedzsment a szálláshely szolgáltatásoknál: Mi alakítja a vendég-elvárásokat?”, *Marketing & Menedzsment*, 55 (EMOK Különszám), 41-51. <https://doi.org/10.15170/mm.2021.55.ksz.01.04>
- Locock, L., Montgomery, C., Parkin, S., et al. (2020), "How do frontline staff use patient experience data for service improvement? Findings from an ethnographic case study evaluation", *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 25 (3), 151-161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1355819619888675>
- Lovelock, Ch. H., & Wirtz, J. (2004), *Services Marketing. People, Technology, Strategy*. Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Plaskoff, J. (2017), "Employee experience: the new human resource management approach", *Strategic HR Review*, 16 (3), 136-141. <https://doi.org/10.1108/shr-12-2016-0108>
- Subramony, M., & Pugh, S. D. (2015), "Services Management Research: Review, Integration, and Future Directions", *Journal of Management*, 41 (1), 349–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314557158>
- Swanson, S. R., & Kelley, S. W. (2001), "Attributions and Outcomes of the Service Recovery Process", *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 9(4), 50–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2001.11501903>
- van Doorn, J. & Verhoef, P. C. (2008), "Critical Incidents and the Impact of Satisfaction on Customer Share.", *Journal of Marketing*, 72(4), 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.72.4.123>
- Veres, Z. (2021), *A szolgáltatásmarketing alapkönyve (bővített kiadás)*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest
- Zemke, R. & Anderson, K. (1990), "Customers from Hell", *Training*, 26 February 25–31.