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Beating around the bush: How obfuscation and attractiveness interact in customer perceptions of service providers

Prior research has found that both knowledgeable and attractiveness enhance customer perceptions of service providers (Ahearne, Gruen, and Jarvis 1999). In many service situations, however, a service provider may not know the answer to a question posed by a customer. In such cases, the service provider could (a) be honest and admit not knowing the answer, (b) obfuscate, i.e., provide a confusing, roundabout answer that does not really answer the question, or (c) lie outright. The purpose of this research is to investigate whether the attractiveness of a service provider alters the effects of obfuscation vs. an honest “don’t know” answer on customer perceptions. The study design involves a 3 X 2 experiment. The honesty variable will have three conditions, namely, (1) service provider provides the correct answer, (2) service provider obfuscates, (3) service provider gives an honest “don’t know” answer. The attractiveness variable will have two conditions, namely, (1) highly attractive looks and (2) highly unattractive looks. Subjects will be provided service encounter scenarios in which they will read dialog from the perspective of a restaurant patron. The dialog will portray the purported interaction between a server and a group of patrons at a bar & grille. The dialog will include a key question from the patron for which the server’s answer will be manipulated between subjects to reflect one of the above three answer conditions. The materials provided to subjects will also include a picture (headshot) of the server that will be manipulated between subjects in accord with the attractiveness variable. After participants read over the interaction dialog, they will fill out a short questionnaire. The questions will assess their perceptions of the service provider, their satisfaction with the service rendered, and their likely tip amount. We expect to find that when a server is attractive, he or she is more likely to get away with obfuscation than a server that is not as attractive. We also expect that an honest “don’t know” will be more damaging when a server is unattractive (vs. highly attractive).