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## Employee-to-Customer Improvisation: A Value Creation Strategy for Navigating the Contemporary Consumption Experience

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### Introduction

As retailing is increasingly adopting online and digital capabilities, retailers are being tasked with the role of supplementing their primary commercial roles by providing unique experiences. Now that prospective customers can shop with ease, in the comfort of their own homes, and have become used to doing so during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that brick-and-mortar retailers offer something that purely

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digital offerings cannot match; that is, a tailored and unique customer experience with notions of a ‘third place’ containing home-like qualities (Ahmed et al., 2022). Hence, retailers are redefining themselves as the staggers of an experience, and looking to the performing arts for pointers on how to create memorable experiences (Debenedetti, 2021). Much work has viewed retail as analogous to theater, creating memorable performances that communicate brand meanings (e.g., Baron et al., 2001). However, when the customer is invited into the performance, improvisation on the part of the employee (as an actor in this analogy) becomes essential in order to respond to what he/she says and does, both in order to create moments of delight, when customer expectations are exceeded, and in order to alter the service performance in an attempt to recover goodwill after a service failure.

Employees must be alert, think and act on the spot when unpredictable customers are enlisted as actors. If customers are to return to the store for their next purchase, instead of turning to their smartphones, the importance of customer service and the customer experience will be critical. While the notion of improvisation has been studied at the broader organizational level (e.g., Moorman & Miner, 1997; Vera & Crossan, 2005), our research advances the concept of employee-to-customer improvisation—a combination of creativity and quick-thinking in order to create unique value both for and with the customer. With this chapter, we propose a new concept of service management necessary to meet the changing demands of contemporary retail and service encounters. We begin with a discussion of employee-to-employee (organizational) improvisation in order to lead into our discussion of employee-to-customer improvisation, highlighting the similarities and differences between the two. We then introduce our conceptual model via an examination of both the individual- and organization-level antecedents of employee-to-customer improvisation. We close with a discussion of the boundary conditions and the managerial practicalities of this practice.

## Employee-to-Employee Improvisation and Employee-to-Customer Improvisation

Despite the similarities, employee-to-customer improvisation differs from the better-established idea of employee-to-employee improvisation, for various important reasons. Besides the perceived role and communication differences between employee-only interactions, and interactions between employees and customers, the goals of employee-to-customer improvisation are different from those employees may have when improvising with each other. For example, during employee-to-employee improvisation, the focus tends to be on new product development, emergency situations, and innovative team performance, or it has a more general purpose, for example, of discovering a new way of doing business.

In contrast, employee-to-customer improvisation is concerned with servicing a specific customer in a specific way, in that what is improvised may differ significantly from one customer to another. In this vein, employee-to-customer improvisation is more ad hoc than employee-to-employee improvisation. While the latter usually entails a clear goal aimed at formally changing the organization, the former usually entails an abstract goal aimed at satisfying the customer in an idiosyncratic, informal manner. As employee-to-customer improvisation is carried out in lockstep with customers (or customer issues), this form of improvisation often demands quicker responses than employee-to-employee improvisation does. Consider, for example, the introduction of the self-service check-in at airports. These kiosks have relocated airline staff, taking them from behind their counters and placing them among their customers to provide assistance. Taking away the employees' routine transactional functions has allowed them to create a richer customer experience, tailored to the customer's individual needs.

With a "richer customer experience" in mind, we focus on the consumer frontline, where employees interact with customers. We build on the organizational improvisational literature to introduce the notion of employee-to-customer improvisation; a concept which (1) embraces variability by emphasizing the need for employee spontaneity and adaptation in-the-moment in response to growing trends in changing consumer

demands (e.g., co-creation, customer participation, and customization) and (2) recognizes the importance of the discretion provided by job autonomy, while similarly recognizing the value of the minimal structure offered by scripts as a guide to behavior. As we discuss, employee-to-customer improvisation is concerned with an employee's improvisation *with* his/her customers.

Like organizational improvisation, we believe employee-to-customer improvisation is a behavior that can be developed by employees and cultivated by managers. Practitioners are already experimenting with the idea of employee-to-customer improvisation as consultancies offering an improvisation-based sales-training surface in numbers, and companies like the *Ford Motor Company* and *Deloitte* are embracing and advocating the benefits of improvisation. Firms such as *Second City Works* (the professional consultancy group of, perhaps, the most famous comedy improvisation group *Second City*) offer improvisation programs that aim to help organizations develop a brand story “that touches customers, employees, and vendors”. Despite this practitioner interest, the employee-to-customer improvisation concept has not been widely investigated in the academic literature. Our work aims to change that.

## **Practical Need for Employee-to-Customer Improvisation: Building a Conceptual Model**

It is important to note that employee-to-customer improvisation is more than just the granting of modest behavioral latitude (autonomy), or allowing employees to elaborate on existing service scripts. Instead, we propose employee-to-customer improvisation in terms of requiring unique employee motivation and ability, coupled with the opportunity to conceive of novel, useful behavior in-the-moment, with the customer. Certainly, higher degrees of autonomy, or scripts, facilitate or hinder improvisation (by increasing or decreasing the opportunity for improvisation), but neither necessarily implies that improvisation will or will not occur.

To distinguish employee-to-customer improvisation from related concepts, we offer the metaphor of traveling in a car in order to understand the key differences between improvisation and other constructs, for example, job autonomy, empowerment, service scripting, and service customization. To reach their destination, drivers require a few essential components. For instance, we might think of having a car as having autonomy. In a car, you can travel from A to B: The car allows someone to travel to where the driver wants to go. In this vein, the car represents autonomy and freedom, and the destination can be understood in terms of completing a task or goal (e.g., helping or delighting a customer). However, in order for the car to travel to its destination, it needs fuel—in other words, it needs energy, not unlike the empowerment that employees benefit from in carrying out their jobs. An unempowered employee is not an especially productive one. Thus, without a car or fuel, you will be left standing, still unable to arrive at your destination. However, with a car and fuel, you can potentially reach your destination.

Scripts, then, provide a map for getting from A to B: They are precise directions you can take to arrive at your destination. The map provides the shortest or most efficient route (perhaps the most common route), as well as alternative routes (e.g., scenic routes) because there is usually more than one way to reach a destination. The choice of route that a driver decides to take can be viewed as service customization. Altogether, the car (autonomy), fuel (empowerment), directions (service scripts) and choices of route (service customization) are critical to any successful road trip. However, another potentially important component is the driver's response to something unforeseen (either positive or negative) that happens en route. This is what we mean by improvisation—it is akin to the unplanned decisions a driver decides to make when driving to a destination. Even though one route may be typically preferred over others (service customization), the driver may occasionally deviate from the chosen route—possibly because of wanting to drive to another destination, or to make an unplanned stop, or he/she may decide to take a different route or, because in some cases, he/she may be redirected to another route—to unfamiliar territory where he/she may have to navigate in relatively impromptu ways. We acknowledge, of course, that both driving and

working are more complex than this. The aim of this illustrative analogy is to highlight what improvisation is and what it is not.

In Table 21.1, we summarize the differences between employee-to-customer improvisation and these related constructs. Going forward, we delineate the concept of employee-to-customer improvisation by pursuing two key objectives: First, we propose a means of conceptualizing employee-to-customer improvisation. We place employee-to-customer improvisation within a typology of existing employee management concepts for managing employee-customer variability—including job autonomy and service scripting. These ideas have a long history and provide the conceptual boundaries of employee-to-customer improvisation and the substrate from which improvisation emerges. On their own, autonomy and service scripts are at odds with improvisation. However, we argue that the appropriate combination of autonomy and scripting will allow improvisation to flourish. Second, we draw on the key elements of the motivation-ability-opportunity (MAO) framework (MacInnis et al., 1991) to create a conceptual framework of employee-to-customer improvisation (see Fig. 21.1), building on identified individual and organizational antecedents. Briefly, we propose that motivation is fueled by an individual employee's predisposition for meeting customer needs. Ability is a function of an individual employee's social skills while opportunity is based on a combination of behavioral guidance (the minimal structures provided by service scripts) and the behavioral latitude (the discretion provided by job autonomy) provided by an organization.

## Motivation: Customer Orientation

The first factor, *motivation*, is an individual's goal-directed intent to engage in a behavior or action. Here, it is defined by the level of customer orientation of an employee. We consider this to be the most appropriate representation of motivation in employee-to-customer improvisation as it has long been considered a key determinant of employees' willingness to actively monitor and adapt to situations as they unfold (Grove et al., 1992). We adopt a definition of customer orientation—an "employee's tendency or predisposition for meeting customer needs in an on-the-job

Table 21.1 A Comparison of Employee-to-Customer Improvisation and Related Concepts

	Job Autonomy	Empowerment	Service Scripts	Service Customization	Employee-Customer Improvisation
Definition	Structures or boundaries within which individuals are able to exercise discretion or control.	Intrinsic motivation for work role reflected in four conditions (self-determination, meaning, competence and impact).	Memorized schemata that describe steps or behaviors to respond to a particular context.	Providing customers with individually tailored products and services from a range of possibilities.	Convergence of planning and action characterized by creativity and quick thinking, allowing in-the-moment innovation using available resources.
Illustrative Metaphor (Driving a car between A and B)	The 'ownership' of a car which allows the driver the freedom to go wherever he/she would like.	The 'fuel' you need to make the car move from A to B.	The 'map' providing the shortest or most efficient route (which may be the most common route), as well as alternative routes.	The 'choice' offered to the driver of taking an alternative route to the norm (e.g., to avoid toll roads or enjoy a more scenic journey).	Driver coming up with a 'unique solution' to an unanticipated change in conditions (e.g., pulling over to work, parking, and switching to a bus to complete the journey).

*(continued)*

Table 21.1 (continued)

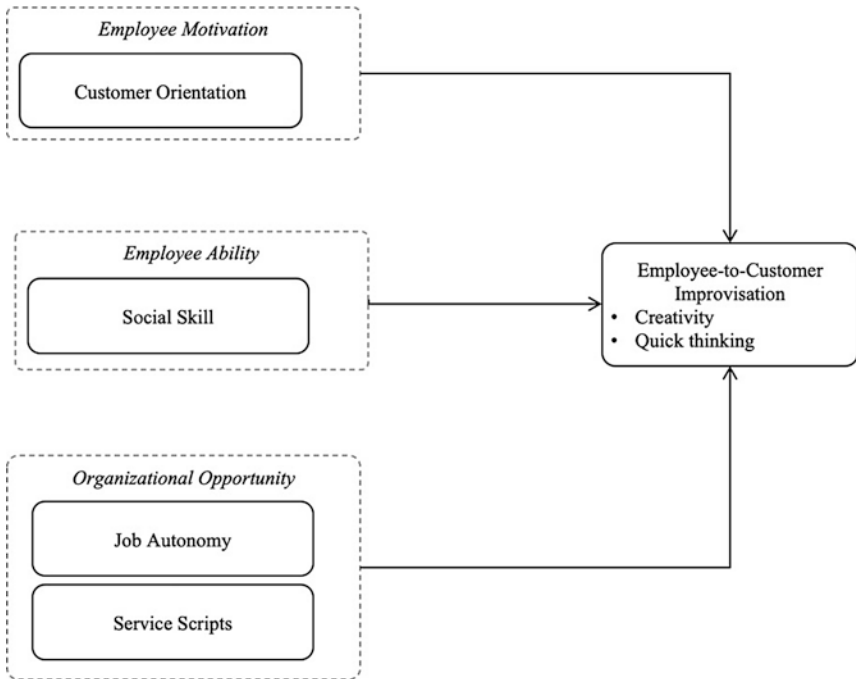
	Job Autonomy	Empowerment	Service Scripts	Service Customization	Employee-Customer Improvisation
Advantages	Leads to efficiencies by short-circuiting lengthy approval processes; greater risk-taking and experimentation; greater role engagement.	Leads to efficiencies by short-circuiting lengthy approval processes; customer perceptions of employee competence; lower role stress and higher job satisfaction and performance.	Increases cognitive efficiency and reduces ambiguity; improves service reliability and consistency; employee and customer shared expectations regarding the service process leading to higher satisfaction.	Increases service 'fit' with customer needs; increases perceived service quality, satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty.	Timeliness of service delivery; novelty of experience improves customer satisfaction; employees perceived as authentic; experimentation and learning drives service innovation; buffers the impact of stressful situations; leads to role mastery.

Disadvantages	Too much autonomy may lead to increased insecurity and role stress; absence of behavioral guidance leads to role ambiguity.	Too much empowerment can lead to role overload and stress particularly where the relevant skills have not been enhanced; employees may choose not to accept empowerment to avoid accountability; may lead to overconfidence and misjudgments.	Uncritical application of service scripts can lead to oversights and mistakes; service experiences may be seen as inauthentic; service encounters lack genuine warmth and meaning.	Customer-led matching of needs with service options is not embedded in employee learning; limits to customizable options undermines customer satisfaction.	'First fit' (rather than 'best fit') nature of employee actions may not always be satisfactory to customers; speed of response may not compensate for 'near enough' solution; may be a source of stress for ill-prepared employees.
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Table 21.1 (continued)

	Job Autonomy	Empowerment	Service Scripts	Service Customization	Employee-Customer Improvisation
Service Context Example	Ritz-Carlton's provision of a \$2000 daily budget to all employees, providing considerable latitude but no specific directions for how to use this resource.	A Zappos employee making the decision to send flowers to a customer who happened to mention his/her state of bereavement in an e-mail; employee had time to reflect on what might cheer the customer up.	Apple's training programs which direct new recruits in which specific words and phrases to use (and those to avoid) when talking with customers.	Virgin Mobile Custom allows customers to control, on the granular level, how many minutes and text messages, as well as how much data, they want on their plans; settings for each can be adjusted directly on a smartphone.	Ritz Carlton restaurant server upon overhearing two diners saying they "feel like a cigar," had asked the security guard to open the hotel's humidior, which was closed at the time, to allow these guests to select a cigar.



**Fig. 21.1** Framework of Employee-to-Customer Improvisation

context” (Brown et al., 2002, p. 111)—which approaches the concept from an attitudinal perspective. We contend that highly customer-oriented employees are more likely to engage in improvisation behavior during the service encounter for two key reasons.

First, customer-oriented employees have a greater behavioral repertoire in terms of service delivery. They have access to a greater range of potential service behaviors (which can be combined and recombined to yield novel service performances). Not only do customer-oriented employees discharge their in-role responsibilities effectively, they are also more likely to perform extra-role behaviors (Donavan et al., 2004), thus extending their range. Further, employees with high levels of customer orientation are more likely to explore learning opportunities, which also increases their range of potential behaviors (Bell et al., 2010).

Second, previous work has demonstrated that customer orientation is a pathway to job satisfaction and commitment, and that customer-oriented employees “thrive in services settings that allow for a high degree of contact time with customers” (Donavan et al., 2004, p. 142). While customer-facing retail encounters are a potential source of role stress for employees, we suggest that customer-oriented employees, rather than walk away from the challenges of such encounters, will experiment with behaviors that help to resolve such stress. They are more likely to view improvisation as a tool for coping with the dynamics and pressures of highly variable retail environments.

### **Ability: Social Skill**

The second factor, *ability*, refers to employees’ innate resources, skills, or proficiencies that aid them in specified behaviors. Social skills reflect the “ability to perceive interpersonal or social cues, integrate these cues with current motivations, generate responses, and enact responses that will satisfy motives and goals” (Norton & Hope, 2001, p. 60). In other words, social skills reflect interpersonal perceptiveness and behavioral flexibility. We suggest that employees’ social skills, for example, their social intelligence and self-monitoring, capture their improvising ability by means of “reading the situation”, assessing whether (or not) their planned response strategy is likely to work and acting accordingly. As such, social skills are employees’ capacity and knowledge concerning which behaviors might work and when to display them, something which requires flexibility and behavioral control. Being able to “read others” or “read between the lines” is the hallmark of having social skills. Among flight attendants, for example, new recruits who were highly socially skilled showed higher levels of training performance than recruits who were poorly socially skilled (Ferris et al., 1986), while other research has found social skills to be the best single predictor of job performance ratings and promotability assessments (Wayne et al., 1997).

Because the highly socially skilled demonstrate interpersonal perceptiveness and behavioral flexibility, we believe this will be consistent with employees’ ability to improvise with customers. Research has shown that,

when a current strategy is unlikely to work, individuals who are highly socially skilled recognize when they should speak up or remain silent (Ferris et al., 2001). Further, in much the same way that employee improvisation involves creativity and quick thinking, social skills reflect the capacity to both adjust behavior to different situational demands and effectively work with others. Thus, social skills capture the cognitive element of reading and understanding social situations, and being able to act on such insight to solve others' problems or create positive experiences.

### **Opportunity: Job Autonomy and Service Scripts**

The third factor, *opportunity*, refers to response-enabling factors that are not under the individual employee's control. This factor suggests the inclusion of organizational variables that either facilitate or eliminate impediments to improvisation. We consider the combined effects of job autonomy and organizational reliance on service scripts as factors that affect the level of employee-to-customer improvisation in the workplace. It is the relative presence (or absence) of these factors or, more accurately their *combination*, that provides the opportunity for improvisation to occur. We now examine each of these factors in turn.

**Job Autonomy:** Autonomous employees who experience more freedom regarding what to do, when to do it, and how to do it tend to be more engaged with creative processes while at work (Zhang et al., 2017), and are more comfortable with experimentation (Kirkman et al., 2004). Autonomy is viewed favorably by managers and researchers alike. However, completely autonomous environments, in which behavioral routines are unwound or constantly challenged, may undermine improvisation and the ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances extemporaneously. For instance, very high levels of autonomy may create the perception among employees that the organization does not place any importance on how service and customer care are conducted. This perceived lack of care and concern could potentially dampen employees' motivation to help customers, much less so in new and spontaneous ways. Although employees may respond positively to some degree of autonomy, too much of it implies a level of responsibility that they might

not be willing to accept. This greater degree of responsibility can induce insecurity in employees (Yukl & Becker, 2006). Similarly, high-level performance pressure is likely to undermine employees' positive responses to autonomous work (Zhang et al., 2017).

Employees in roles for which there is little behavioral guidance are likely to experience role ambiguity. Highly autonomous work environments are less likely to be clear with regards to organizational goals and targets, making it challenging for employees to improvise. In the extreme, researchers have argued that combining "creativity ... with low levels of standardization may result in chaos" (Gilson et al., 2005, p. 523), and even foment unethical behavior (Vincent & Polman, 2016). Thus, we propose that the relationship between job autonomy and employee-to-customer improvisation will be curvilinear such that, at low and high levels of autonomy, improvisation will be low, while at moderate levels of autonomy, it will be high.

**Service Scripts:** We also argue that a moderate level of organizational scripts is likely to be optimal for improvisation to occur. While highly scripted authoritarian organizations tend to stifle innovation, using both centralization and formalization, organizational scripts may assist employees in coping with ambiguity while also removing the uncertainty associated with the lack of goals or targets. Earlier work on organizational improvisation is unanimous in its view that there must be a 'minimal structure' (e.g., some routines and effective practices) from which improvised actions can originate (Vera & Crossan, 2005).

While tightly scripted organizations demotivate and restrain employee engagement in the service process, we suggest moderate scripting provides parameters while also allowing serendipity. A set of routines, goals, deadlines, and responsibilities is needed to specify what behaviors are possible without dictating exact behaviors during discrete service encounters, thus facilitating the process of extemporaneous creation. The structure, therefore, provides the component part from which improvised behaviors materialize and it provides the rules and boundaries necessary to protect against excessive or undesired variation. Like the chords in a piece of music, improvised behaviors emerge from "recombining routines or ideas in new ways or by mixing routines that were previously separate" (Moorman & Miner, 1997, p. 95). Further, employees may be able to fall

back on standardized practices during a service encounter in order to “buy themselves time” with customers while seeking alternative solutions. The need to balance standardization with the desire for creativity (Gilson et al., 2005) leads us to propose that the relationship between service scripts and employee-to-customer improvisation will be curvilinear such that, at low and high levels of service scripts, improvisation will be low, while at moderate levels of service scripts, it will be high.

Taken together, the utility of this moderate level of service scripting will be at its greatest in a context of moderate autonomy. At low levels of job autonomy and high levels of organizational reliance on service scripts, employees are required to adhere to strict scripts and routines with little ability to make in-the-moment decisions about job-related activities, thus stifling improvisation. Similarly, at high levels of job autonomy and low levels of service scripting, the lack of direction and structure could result in ineffective or even chaotic approaches to improvisation. Thus, we suggest that effective employee-to-customer improvisation is most likely to emerge in workplaces characterized by *both* moderate levels of autonomy and moderate service scripts.

## Boundary Conditions of Employee-to-Customer Improvisation

In our view, employee-to-customer improvisation is a behavioral response to unexpected situations, whether related to service failure (i.e., rectifying a problem) or service enhancement (i.e., creating unanticipated value). It is plausible, however, that these different contexts might have implications for the nature and efficacy of the improvisation. The literature on the service recovery paradox, for example, demonstrates how effective service recovery can lead to a disproportionate uplift in customer satisfaction (compared with a situation in which failure had not occurred in the first place). Potentially, improvisation in a service failure and recovery context could thus be preferable (and thought of as more valuable or instrumental) to contexts in which employees seek to create unanticipated sources of value.

The success of employee-to-customer improvisation is also likely to be affected by the complexity of a service encounter. The number and intricacy of the steps required to perform a service are related to its complexity. It follows that the more sub-processes or steps that allow executional latitude, divergence, or customizability, the more variable the service. Thus, complex service processes may offer greater opportunities for improvisation in order to unearth shortcuts and efficiencies during service delivery. The impact of employee-to-customer improvisation is thus likely to be contingent on the nature of the service being provided. In relatively stable task environments, giving more specific direction to employees may be preferred over encouraging employee-to-customer improvisation, and vice versa in more variable task environments.

The interactions that occur between employees in attempting to improvise jointly with customers are also important. Role modeling by employees and supervisors nurtures creativity, which implies that improvisation might increase as a result of these interactions. In situations where service is delivered by teams (e.g., in business-to-business or industrial contexts), there are implications for team-based improvisation. Work on team learning is relatively advanced. Similarly, researchers have generated a rich body of literature on team- and group-level creativity and innovativeness. While improvisation introduces the added complication of time sensitivity, insights from these literatures might nonetheless be instructive when it comes to understanding how several customer service employees can improvise in a coordinated manner.

## **Developing Improvisational Capability**

To the extent that success in improvisation is dependent on the skill of the individual, retailers might explore ways in which they can train and develop improvisation capabilities. Despite the apparent paradox involved, retailers must prepare employees to be spontaneous. Of course, this might be easier to achieve in smaller relationship-focused retail, for example, a luxury setting, than in larger transactional-focused chain stores. Nonetheless, there is evidence that customer orientation and social skills can be enhanced through various actions or interventions (e.g.,

providing learning opportunities, leadership, role-modeling, and training), irrespective of the nature of the retail environment. Retailers might pursue opportunities to develop the individual traits and attitudes that are the foundation of improvisation.

Managers might also explore ways in which the improvisation capabilities of existing employees can be enhanced. While improvisation entails creativity and quick-thinking in real time, a certain amount of training is required, pertaining to the diverse ways of adjusting to varying service situations, in order to prevent employees improvising in an incompetent manner. The improvisation techniques used in the creative industries (e.g., “yes and-ing,” “listening for offers,” and “last word spoken”) might be employed during simulated customer service encounters to train employees to adapt and build upon their improvisatory partner’s contribution as part of an improvisatory exchange. These strategies could encourage participants to be focused, in-the-moment, and agile enough to respond to the contribution made by their counterpart, thus improving their attentiveness and preparedness to work with unexpected customer contributions.

Employees might also receive training in perceiving nonverbal cues, which requires paying attention to posture, facial expressions, and eye contact. When employees overly focus on service protocols, which guide what to say next, they only half-listen to customers, which means that important information can be overlooked. For instance, athletic wear retailer *Lululemon* guides its employees toward opening conversations with customers by inquiring what activity they would be using the products for, in order to tailor the recommendations and service provided to the individual and the activity, then continuing to adapt the service experience as more information is gathered from the customer, both verbally and nonverbally.

In addition, it is also worth asking who benefits from employee-to-customer improvisation—the retailer or the customer? Many aspects of the service encounter are now “taken for granted” (e.g., personalization, fast follow-up, around-the-clock availability). There is, however, growing recognition of the role of agency in the shaping of taken-for-granted practices which are inherently mutable. Consider, for example, how the use of humor by *Southwest Airlines* flight attendants has been

promulgated throughout the airline industry, with the normally dour delivery of pre-flight safety instructions becoming increasingly creative at progressive airlines such as *Air New Zealand* and Canada's *WestJet Airlines*. From a theoretical perspective, a more developed version of our framework might benefit from the inclusion of a broader suite of consumer-driven moderators and firm-driven boundary conditions (e.g., industry-level practices, technology adoption). Although there are surely exceptions to the rule, we contend that employee-to-customer improvisation is desired by both firms and customers—a win-win—because, when done well, it provides a pathway to a more satisfying service encounter.

Finally, it bears noting that, while much of what the employee-to-customer improvisation concept has to offer is positive, we acknowledge the risk of employees improvising poorly. It is possible that employees, in their attempts to improvise in-the-moment, may take a course of action that neither solves a problem nor creates additional value. Further, some employees who are not sufficiently equipped to improvise may find the notion stressful. Excessive improvisation, as well as improvisation without a clear minimal structure, may lead to undesired variations in the delivery of products or services. Indeed, there are some contexts in which improvisation may not be desired. For example, brand communication is paramount to some retail contexts, and employee-to-customer improvisation could risk complicating a brand's message by using approaches that are inconsistent between employees.

## Closing Thoughts

Employee-to-customer improvisation can be both proactive (enacted as a value-add) and reactive (enacted as a result of a service failure, problem, or other unforeseen negative event). To encourage improvising, managers should develop and cultivate a culture of changing plans, similar to the rules of jazz, which is one of the origins of improvisation. Improvisation training is increasingly being built into the learning and development programs of global firms such as *Google*, *PepsiCo*, and *McKinsey*. Relatedly, the *Huffington Post* has reported that improvisational skills are necessary when it comes to confidently navigating change in the modern business

world. In light of the benefits of improvisation, the business schools at Duke, Columbia, MIT, UCLA, and Stanford have begun integrating improvisation principles into their MBA curricula. Moreover, as COVID-19 laid bare, retailers benefited from improvisation, for example, restaurants improvised using online food delivery as their customer bases disappeared during lockdown restrictions. While these examples highlight the general importance of employee-to-employee, or organizational improvisation, our work shines a light on the improvisation that occurs between employees and customers and the unique role that it plays during increasingly dynamic retail and service encounters, and evolving consumption rituals.

From a research viewpoint, establishing a relationship between improvisation, customer orientation, social skills, service scripts, and job autonomy could initiate future work focusing on further understanding employee-customer interactions. The rapid rise of digital offerings, together with the increasing wealth of customer-information, is changing the retail landscape, creating a need for a new type of improvisation: employee-to-customer improvisation. Our intention was to shine a light on the unique nature of the improvisation occurring between employees and customers. By assembling a MAO framework of employee-to-customer improvisation, we explore the possible links between a diverse range of individual and organizational variables and a new concept of marketing, organizational, psychological, and dramaturgical relevance, in order to deliver on the promise of an exceptional customer experience.

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