# Customer Rage and the Salesperson: A Call for Research and a Suggested Approach

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## Extended Abstract

*After being denied an overdraft, an irate customer returns to the bank with a gun and opens fire on bank employees and customers* (The Times of Israel Staff 2013).

*A Dunkin Donuts employee is treated for first-degree burns after being doused with a cup of coffee by an angry customer* (Nickerson 2006).

Over the past 30 years a significant stream of research has investigated the importance of satisfying or delighting customers and the potential negative consequences that stem from customer dissatisfaction. For example, we know that dissatisfied customers are more likely to complain, tell others about their negative experiences, and switch suppliers (for a summary of this research, see Sheth and Mitral 2003). However, the incidents opening this manuscript point to an extreme type of dissatisfied customer reaction that has received little research attention: customer rage.

Customer rage has been defined as "a form of anger comprised of a spectrum of negative emotions including ferocity, fury, wrath, disgust, contempt, scorn, and resentment (Shaver et al. 1987)." According to a series of studies conducted by Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business, customer rage is a widespread and growing problem (Popken 2013). Given the potential for a host of negative outcomes ranging from lost business to bodily harm, it is not surprising that researchers are beginning to study the customer rage construct. For example, in the marketing literature researchers have investigated anger and rage in service situations (Bougle et al. 2003; Kalamas et al. 2008; Koppitsch et al. 2013). However, little research has focused on customer rage in the personal selling context.

As a boundary-spanner the salesperson is generally the main contact between the selling organization and its customers. As a result, it seems likely that the salesperson would suffer the brunt of any negative customer feelings or behaviors directed at the salesperson's company. The purpose of this study is to discuss the concept of customer rage and its potential impact on the salesperson. Further, we will present a potential approach to studying

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customer rage in the professional selling context and suggest a series of questions to guide this research.


## Literature Review

The terms anger and rage are often used interchangeably. However, anger and rage should be considered two different, but related constructs. The American Psychological Association Encyclopedia of Psychology defines anger as an emotion characterized by antagonism toward someone or something you feel has deliberately wronged you (Kazdin 2000). Kalamas and her colleagues (Kalamas et al. 2008) suggest that anger should be thought of as a continuum based on the intensity of negative emotion. They termed mild negative emotion to be an annoyance, moderate negative emotion to be anger, and strong negative emotion to be rage. This conceptualization of rage as an intensely negative emotion is consistent with the definition of consumer rage presented earlier in this manuscript as well as the following widely accept definition of consumer rage, "an intense anger coupled with expressions of physical, verbal, or other potentially harmful behaviors resulting in severe negative consequences for firms, employees, and even other valued customers (Patterson et al. 2009, p. 6)."

Lazarus (1991) suggested that negative emotions such as anger and rage emerge as a result of a two-step cognitive appraisal process. In the first step, termed the primary appraisal, the individual decides if he or she has anything at stake in the encounter (Folkman et al. 1986). This includes any situations in which the individual, or a significant other's, safety, esteem, or goals are at risk. It is important to note that psychological needs, such as self-esteem, and the perceived fairness of an action are included in this assessment (Patterson et al. 2009). If the primary appraisal is positive, a secondary appraisal is made to evaluate if anything can be done to overcome or prevent the potential negative outcomes. These efforts to overcome or minimize the negative consequences of an emotional encounter have been termed "coping" mechanisms (Folkman and Lazarus 1988). The choice of coping mechanism is often linked to the intensity of anger the individual is experiencing. For example, coping in an annoyance situation may simply take the form of a deep breath or writing a letter of complaint. However, the coping strategies for rage may include shouting, spreading negative word of mouth, or even revenge-seeking behaviors (Zourrig et al. 2009).

As research of customer rage is in its early stages, there is a lack of consensus on how best to approach the study of the construct as well as its antecedents and consequences. However, in two recent studies (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2009, Surachartkumtonkun et al. 2015) the Critical Incident

Technique (CIT) has shown promise as a method for exploring customer rage. The CIT is a qualitative research method often used to elicit a detailed description of situations or incidents that allow exploration of core concepts and key themes (Gremler 2004). In the first of these articles, the CIT was modified to elicit detailed descriptions of situations in which respondents, as a customer or employee, had experienced rage resulting from a "failure or action on the part of the organization (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2009, p 225)." This modified CIT instrument, called the Rage Emotion Critical Incident Technique (RECIT), was designed to provide a holistic view of the rage incident, including insights into the situation that lead to customer rage, how the customer rage issue was handled, and the aftermath of the incident. In the second of these articles the RECIT was used to study customer rage over three points in time (an initial service failure followed by two ineffective service recovery efforts).

Both the McColl-Kennedy et al., (2009) and Surachartkumtonkun et al. (2015) studies made significant contributions to our knowledge of customer rage and its antecedents and consequences. For example, the former of these studies isolated three types of customer rage: Rancorous Rage, Retaliatory Rage and Displaced Rage. In Rancorous Rage situations customers tended to use verbal coping strategies, such as yelling. In Retaliatory Rage situations customers tended to utilize physical coping strategies, such as damaging property or trying to physically harm an offending employee. In Displaced Rage situations customers tended to take their anger out on others not directly involved in the situation. In the latter of these two studies it was found that negative emotion carry over across service recovery attempts. Thus, anger can spiral into rage with unsatisfying service recovery efforts.

While marketing literature is beginning to investigate anger and rage in the service failure context, little research has focused on anger or rage in the selling context. In one notable exception, Koppitsch et al., (2013) investigated how salespeople can use reprimands as an approach to lessening customers' anger in problem situations. In this research, Koppitsch and his colleagues found that a salesperson's verbal reprimand of another "offending" employee for a service failure in front of the offended customer can reduce the customer's anger and any desire for revenge.

Is it surprising that so little research has looked at anger and rage in the selling context as the salesperson, much like an ambassador, occupies a position at the boundary of the organization. In representing the organization the salesperson is often the messenger of good or bad news. Further, the salesperson is often the point person for any customer concerns. As a result, it seems likely that the salesperson would suffer the brunt of any negative customer feelings or behaviors directed at the salesperson's company. Clearly, research that helps understand and offers potential remedies for customer rage

should be of interest to both practitioners and academics.

## Studying Rage

As previously mentioned, the RECIT has proved to be a useful method of exploring customer rage, as well as its antecedents and consequences. Thus, we propose that a modified version of the RECIT be used to study customer rage in the buyer/seller interaction. The RECIT was designed to investigate a series of failed service encounters between a customer and an organization (or service personnel). However, we propose two modifications to the RECIT. First, the RECIT would be modified to direct the respondent to focus specifically on an interaction between a customer and a salesperson. Second, the RECIT would be modified to focus not just on a negative situation, but also on a positive situation in which a salesperson's actions defused a potential customer rage situation. While the RECIT elicits only descriptions of negative customer rage situations, the CIT has traditionally been used to elicit descriptions of both negative and positive actions (Cascio, 1982). With descriptions of positive and negative emotional customer rage situations, we should be able to gain insights into the types of situations that tend to induce customer rage as well as approaches that salespeople have effectively or ineffectively used to lessen that rage.

The research suggested in this manuscript should contribute by being one of the first to explore the customer rage construct in the personal selling context. As such, it should begin the process of shedding light on several questions including:
1. Is customer rage an issue in the personal selling context?
2. How is customer rage (dis)similar to rage in other context?
3. Are their telltale signals emanating from the customer that can alert the salesperson of the potential for customer rage?
4. What behaviors and strategies can salespeople use to effectively reduce the potential for customer rage?
5. What strategies can salespeople use to effectively defuse customer rage?

Importantly, these insights into customer rage have the potential to lessen the stress inherent in the sales position by better preparing the salesperson to identify and defuse emerging customer rage situations.

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**Keywords:** Consumer rage, consumer anger, boundary spanners

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** Insights into the process of consumer anger and rage should be helpful to sales practitioners and the students we are preparing to enter sales careers.

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