

# Emotional Exhaustion and Its Role in Service Sabotage among Retail Sales Employees

Diane R. Edmondson, [diane.edmondson@mtsu.edu](mailto:diane.edmondson@mtsu.edu)

Lucy M. Matthews, [lucy.matthews@mtsu.edu](mailto:lucy.matthews@mtsu.edu)

Cheryl B. Ward, [cheryl.ward@mtsu.edu](mailto:cheryl.ward@mtsu.edu)

## Introduction

Retail sales employees are subject to pressures and strains not found in other positions in the organization (Mulki, Jaramillo and Locander 2006; Choo, Rutherford and Park 2013). Research has found that retail sales employees are subject to a great deal of stress because they “are caught in a difficult position when they perceive that client demands cannot or will not be met by the organization” (Cordes and Dougherty 1993, p. 644). If retail sales employees do not have the ability to get rid of the conflict between customer and organizational demands, the employees may engage in service sabotage as a way to show their unhappiness with the organization.

Service sabotage examines voluntary, overt and covert behaviors that negatively affect the relationship between the organization and the customer (Harris and Ogbonna 2006, 2002). Service sabotage is only conducted by retail sales employees to the final customer in service settings; therefore, only behaviors which would negatively affect the customer-organization relationship are included. Some examples of service sabotage include a retail sales employee being rude to a customer, purposely overcharging or undercharging a customer’s purchase, intentionally working slower than expected, and showing favoritism to certain customers. The limited research in service sabotage has found that more than 85% of customer-contact employees admitted to engaging in some form of service sabotage in a one week period (Harris and Ogbonna 2002).

Overall, this paper investigates why retail sales employees are willing to engage in service sabotage as well as what an organization can do to lessen the effects of service sabotage. By understanding retail sales employees’ motivations to engage in service sabotage, researchers and practitioners can develop guidelines organizations may use to avoid or reduce service sabotage (Caudron 1995; Harris and Ogbonna 2002).

## Literature Review

### Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is a topic of interest in marketing and organizational behavior (Wright and Cropanzano 1998), primarily because of the negative implications of emotional exhaustion on employees and organizations (Cordes and Dougherty 1993). Conservation resources theory suggests that stress (e.g. dealing with hostile customers) reduces an employee’s available resources (e.g. self-esteem, satisfaction, time) such that a loss of resources will negatively impact the employee’s ability to do his or her job (Halbesleben and Buckley 2004; Hobfoll 1989). Emotional resource depletion can occur when an employee is faced with excessive job demands and continuous work stress (Shiron 1989; Wright and Cropanzano 1998), making him or her unable to face the excessive job demands. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Emotional exhaustion will positively impact service sabotage.*

### Perceived Organizational Support and Emotional Exhaustion

Employees engaging in behaviors that negatively affect the customer-organization relationship may cost the service organization both sales and customers and may ultimately cause the organization to fail. Hence this paper examines how perceived organizational support might mitigate a retail sales employee’s emotional exhaustion. Perceived organizational support (POS) is defined as employees’ “global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being” (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson and Sowa 1986, p. 501). Employees who believe that their organization is committed to them will be committed to the organization (e.g. Eisenberger, Lynch, Aselage and Rohdieck 2004; Jolke 2007). If an organization provides an adequate amount of organizational support, then the organization will be able to help retail sales employees

deal with these stresses and challenges associated with their job, leading to the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Perceived organizational support will negatively impact emotional exhaustion.*

### **Perceived Organizational Support and Service Sabotage**

In addition, perceived organizational support uses the norm of reciprocity to help explain how employees view their organization's commitment to them through the support resources the organization provides and how that level of support influences the level of commitment the employee provides back to the organization (Eisenberger, et al. 1986; Emerson and Cook 1978; Gouldner 1960; Riggle, Edmondson, and Hansen 2009). The norm of reciprocity states that employees will feel obligated to repay favorable treatment (Eisenberger, et al. 2004; Rousseau 1990; Mowday, Porter and Steers 1982). In other words, if an organization treats their employees well, then the employees will feel obligated to act in ways that are of value to the organization (i.e. meeting the organizations goals and objectives) (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, and Rhoades 2001). This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Perceived organizational support will negatively impact service sabotage.*

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

An online panel was utilized to collect the data. To ensure that respondents were actively participating in the survey, several validation checks were included in the survey instrument. To assure that there were no order effects, the order of questions was randomized across respondents. A total of 216 respondents completed the survey.

### **Measures and Data Analysis**

All of the scales proposed in this study have been taken from the extant literature. Each scale was unidimensional and measured on a 7-point scale. Service sabotage ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) was measured using a 6-item scale based off of Harris and Ogbonna's (2006) measure. Emotional Exhaustion ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) was measured using a 9-item scale from Mulki, Jaramillo and Locander (2006). Perceived organizational support ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) was measured using the 8-item shortened version of the scale by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002). Partial least squares structural equations modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 3.2.6 is used to analyze the data (Ringle, Wende, & Becker 2015).

### **Results**

First, the reflective model was evaluated to examine its reliability and validity (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics 2009). Then, the structural model was tested using bootstrapping (5000 resamples) generating standard errors and t-statistics to evaluate the statistical significance of the path coefficients (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics 2009). The results support H<sub>1</sub> through H<sub>3</sub>. For H<sub>1</sub>, emotional exhaustion positively impacts service sabotage ( $\beta = 0.156$ ,  $t = 1.964$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The path from perceived organizational support to emotional exhaustion (H<sub>2</sub>) is negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.571$ ,  $t = 13.1399$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). For H<sub>3</sub>, perceived organizational support also negatively impacts service sabotage ( $\beta = -0.401$ ,  $t = 5.438$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## **Discussion**

### **Emotional Exhaustion**

The impact of emotional exhaustion on a retail sales employee's usage of service sabotage was the major focus of this study. It was hypothesized and supported that emotional exhaustion could lead to service sabotage since this is a way the employee can show his or her discontent with the organization. This finding bolsters the belief that when a retail sales employee faces excessive job demands or job conflicts, that employee is likely to become emotionally exhausted leading to service sabotage.

### **Perceived Organizational Support**

It was hypothesized that perceived organizational support would negatively impact service sabotage. Results indicate that a retail sales employee's perception of organizational support lessens the employee's usage of service sabotage directly as well as through emotional exhaustion. By providing adequate organizational support, an organization can reduce or mitigate a retail sales employee's emotional exhaustion and service sabotage. In essence, retail sales employees who perceive the organization supports them will be more committed and thus engage in organizationally desired behaviors.

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**Keywords:** *Service Sabotage, Emotional Exhaustion, Perceived Organizational Support*

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** This paper investigates why retail sales employees are willing to engage in service sabotage and what an organization can do to lessen the effects of service sabotage.

**Author Information:**

Diane Edmondson is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Middle Tennessee State University.

Lucy Matthews is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Middle Tennessee State University.

Cheryl Ward is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Middle Tennessee State University.

**TRACK: Retailing**