

SPEAK MY LANGUAGE IF YOU WANT ME TO COME BACK! SERVICE LANGUAGE'S IMPACT ON RETURN INTENTIONS

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Purpose

Given the importance of customer loyalty in services, the article addresses how customer loyalty is influenced by the language the service provider uses. Despite the importance of the interaction in service encounters, service research assumes that both customers and service providers share a common native language. This might not be the case on bilingual markets. Specifically, the paper tests whether bilinguals who are served in their second language are less likely to return to the service provider. Moreover, it examines the mediating role of perceived speech accommodation efforts, and the moderating roles of bilinguals' perceived second language proficiency and emotional attachment to the native language.

Design/method/approach

Study 1 and 2 tests the main hypothesis using a scenario-based experiment with adult consumers in two bilingual countries (Belgium, Finland) and in different settings (restaurant, telecom). Study 3 further elaborates on these findings using a retrospective survey of actual customer experiences in Belgium.

Findings

Driven by perceptions of speech accommodation efforts and consistent throughout different services, countries and methods, customer return intentions sharply decrease when service providers in bilingual markets do not use the customer's language. Moreover, this relationship is not dependent on consumers' perceived second language proficiency, but rather upon their emotional attachment to their native language.

Originality/value

This is the first study of bilingual customers' reactions to being served in their second language, among bilingual customers from different countries. Given that more than half the countries in the world are multilingual, service providers need to take customers' native language into account when serving bilingual customers.