

Are Your Customers Good Enough for Your Service Business?

Author(s): John Bateson

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John Bateson

Executive Overview

Services businesses have the unique characteristic that their efficiency is at least partially driven by the performance of their consumers, who are active participants in the production process. Not only that, but consumer performance also drives satisfaction. This article draws on cognitive psychology to suggest that script theory can unify the needs of the service organization and the customer. This consumer-behavior perspective is used to define the key tasks for managing consumer performance.

When the Wendy's hamburger chain first appeared in Europe, customers were surprised to receive instructions on how to buy a burger. A leaflet was distributed to customers waiting in line. It read:

At Wendy Restaurants we don't tell you how to have your hamburger. You tell us. The order-taker will want to know what size of hamburger you would like. A glance at the menu will help you to make up your mind. With cheese or without?

Then you've a choice of what goes on top. Mayonnaise, Ketchup, Pickle, Fresh Onion, Juicy Tomato, Crisp Lettuce, Mustard. Choose as many as you like—or have the lot—all at no extra charge. . . .

We are all used to receiving an instruction manual with our new VCR, DVD, or personal stereo. But why would anyone issue an instruction manual for a fast-food restaurant?¹

A study of weekend shopping in Blockbuster Video yielded an interesting finding. A number of customers entered the store and went directly to the returns bin instead of the shelves. They retrieved videos and moved directly to the check-out. What could they be doing?² Why would a retail customer not use the store in the way it was intended? What can we learn from these behaviors?

Expert and Novice Customers

In essence, a service is a performance³ in which consumers are often physically present and are active participants. Consumers are assigned and must perform a specific set of tasks by the service organization. In restaurants we queue up when asked to do so, order from a menu when asked, and sometimes even clear our own tables. At a doctor's surgery, we provide the information necessary for the diagnosis. Consumer performance, our participation in the production process, needs to be managed for a service firm to be successful.⁴

The satisfaction of consumers depends not only on how the service provider performs, but also on how the consumer performs.

Understanding and managing consumer performance can improve both the operational efficiency of the business and customer satisfaction. When consumers are unable to perform their assigned tasks and to comply with the requirements of the service production process, the service operation does not function well.⁵ The satisfaction of consumers depends not only on how the service provider performs, but also on how the consumer performs. By contributing information and physical and mental effort, consumers contribute directly to their own satisfaction.⁶

Not all consumers are equally proficient in terms of performance. A service firm has to contend with "novices" and "experts." A novice does not know what to do or how to perform. An expert knows how to be part of the production process and what role to follow. Experts in Blockbuster know how to use the store. They understand how to make their own selection and check out. With even greater expertise, they know how the different categories of titles are arranged and are efficient in their selection. A real Blockbuster expert learned a long time ago that the hottest new titles never stay on the shelves for long. The best place to look for them is therefore in the returns bin before they are reshelfed.

Research in cognitive psychology has shown that experts differ from novices in the amount, the content, and the organization of their knowledge.⁷ So it is not only how much information an individual holds, nor even its content, but how the knowledge is organized that defines an expert. These findings have been shown in such diverse fields as solving physics problems,⁸ political reasoning,⁹ medical diagnosis,¹⁰ and the processing of nutritional information by consumers.¹¹

Expert consumer performance should not be confused with the concept of an "expert consumer," i.e., an individual who has expertise in the choice process of buying. There has been considerable research into both the nature of that choice process expertise¹² and into its implications. A number of researchers, for example, have shown the counter-intuitive finding that consumer-choice novices are more loyal customers. They tend to rely on the sales person for expertise.¹³ Long-term relationships with retail staff have been shown to give customers confidence.¹⁴

The purpose of this article is first to explain how consumer performance affects an organization's operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. It then goes on to focus on understanding performance from the consumer's perspective and draws on psychology to suggest that the concept of a mental script is a powerful unifying idea. It enables a much better definition of an expert and a novice. It also provides insights into how to manage consumer performance. The final section suggests the next steps in developing these ideas.

Consumer Performance and Operational Efficiency

For those in charge of a service organization's operations, customers are a source of many of their problems. Since consumer performance is

part of service operations, the diversity and unpredictability of consumers are major sources of uncertainty. Novice consumers in particular may disrupt the process by failing to comply with procedures.¹⁵ Watching foreign tourists in almost any service business soon reveals the damage that novice consumers can do to operational efficiency.

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The extent to which the consumer is part of the process is regarded by some as the dominant constraint on a service system's efficiency.¹⁶ Logically, therefore, a service operation's efficiency can be improved by limiting the extent of consumer performance in services.¹⁷

This approach argues for the buffering of the technical core, or decoupling of production from environmental and customer disturbance. Such models formed the foundation of modern manufacturing theory until the idea of lean manufacturing emerged.¹⁸ Applied to services, this buffering approach argues for the minimization of the dependence on consumer performance and the "production-lining" of parts of the operation that can be isolated.¹⁹ Perhaps the classic example has been the evolution of check processing in banks. It was once part of the interactive service experience. Checks were processed in branches, and customers had access during the whole process. Today processing is performed in huge "paper factories," and customers know that checks have been processed only when the transaction has been posted to their account. The service is less personal, but cost per check processed has dropped dramatically.

The approach that recommends limiting consumer performance distinguishes between high and low customer-contact systems. High customer-contact systems are justified under certain conditions. First, when service production and delivery are absolutely inseparable, high customer contact is needed, as in the case of hairdressers who are unable to provide their service when the customers are not present. Second, customer contact is sometimes desirable because it provides an opportunity to sell additional services. Finally, high-contact systems are desirable when customers can supplement or substitute for the labor and information provided by service employees. Service systems

which do not meet any of these criteria are, under this approach, regarded as candidates for decoupling into low-contact systems.²⁰

When service production and delivery are absolutely inseparable, high customer contact is needed.

High-contact systems depend for their efficiency on the management of the way in which the consumer behaves: consumer performance. Low-contact systems can be isolated from the customer and are open to the use of more traditional manufacturing "production-line" approaches.

The impact of having performance-expert consumers can be profound. In financial planning, for instance, planners log about five times as many hours on a first-year client as they do on a repeat customer. Part of these extra hours results from the time required to create records and profiles. The rest of the time is taken by the client learning to communicate with the planner and the company. This collaborative learning between client and planner can create enormous productivity advantages.²¹

In the auto service business, expert customers are also cheaper to serve because they tend to call in advance for appointments, are more flexible on scheduling, and are better at describing the problem. New customers tend to drive in off the street at lunchtime, when bays are already fully utilized, and give vague definitions of the car's problems.²²

A side benefit of expert consumers is their impact on the motivation of contact personnel. Because they are expert, they can recognize good service and praise employees. They also understand the complexity of the system and can be more tolerant of failure.

One view is that the consumer is an enemy and a source of uncertainty. The alternative view sees the presence of the consumer in service operations as an opportunity to use the consumer as a resource—to increase the degree of consumer performance. This alternative involves rethinking the service to transfer part of the current service production to the consumer.²³ The greater the consumer performance, the less labor input the service company needs to provide. Classic examples of shifting labor to the consumer are self-service gasoline or the now universal habit of carrying one's own baggage onto aircraft.

Consumer Satisfaction and Consumer Performance

If consumer performance is to be shifted or reduced or increased, what will be the impact on consumer satisfaction with the service? How can consumers be managed as part of the production process?

Although research in consumer satisfaction is voluminous,²⁴ the basis of consumer satisfaction is very simple. Consumers will be satisfied if they perceive themselves to have received a service equal to or greater than the service they expected.²⁵ To this model of satisfaction needs to be added the simple idea of attribution. To the extent that a service experience is satisfying or not, do consumers attribute that success or failure to themselves or to the service firm? Managing consumer satisfaction therefore becomes the art of managing attribution, perceived service quality, and expectations. A consumer expecting table service might be dissatisfied to find a buffet. Operationally, the buffet would be much more efficient, but the potential consumer dissatisfaction would far outweigh any cost savings. A better approach is to reset the consumer's expectations to include a buffet.

Following this logic, consumer performance can influence satisfaction in a number of ways. An expert consumer performer will enable the service firm to deliver an expected "script" (to be defined in a moment) and therefore meet expectations. Moreover, the consumer will often have a sense of achievement in successfully navigating a service experience. Achievement is known to be a determinant of satisfaction.²⁶ Successful performance will also give consumers a sense of control of the situation, which has been shown to be motivational.²⁷

A number of studies have also shown that a lack of consumer performance expertise can cause dissatisfaction. In a study of consumer satisfaction with self-service technologies, researchers found that over one-third of incidents that caused dissatisfaction were due to what consumers viewed as "poor design." However, consider the examples given:

"I was trying to order books from a book club online. The system was confusing and I ordered two of the same title without knowing it" and "I did not realize that some ATM machines put limits on how much you can get out."

These comments could just as easily be interpreted as a lack of script knowledge on the part of the consumer.²⁸

Performance can also influence satisfaction through attribution. There is a proven tendency for individuals to claim more responsibility for success and less responsibility for failure in situations in which the outcome is produced with others. The "self-serving bias" has been shown to be applicable to situations of service co-production.²⁹ Studies of self-service technology have also shown that consumers tend to blame the technology when things go wrong but take the credit themselves when the experience is satisfying.³⁰

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Consumer Scripts

The key to managing consumer performance is an understanding of consumer behavior during such service experiences. Such understanding provides insight into how to create experts and how to create systems to cope with novices and use experts.

Script Theory

The most intuitively attractive and theoretically sound model of consumer behavior is script theory.³¹ It has a long tradition in cognitive psychology. It argues that knowledge about familiar, frequent situations is stored in our minds as a coherent description of events expected to occur.³² Such scripts are analogous to a theatrical or film script, which specifies roles for different individuals, actions, and props. For example, a banking script assumes a "set" that includes a cashier or teller, a branch, a counter, forms, and other customers.

Psychologists suggest that consumer scripts, like theatrical scripts, can be broken into subsets or scenes. Thus, an internet retailing script may be composed of scenes relevant to logging-in, browsing, checking-out, and paying. A script contains a set of actions related to an event. Researchers have shown that when respondents are asked to describe commonly occurring events, many actions are mentioned by more than half of the people.³³ Interestingly, scripts can be so strong that individuals will "fill in the gaps." Experiments have shown that respondents, when shown a commonly occurring event and then asked to describe it, will often "remember" seeing actions that were not presented.³⁴ Experiments have also shown re-

spondents re-ordering events actually presented to them to conform with what they would normally expect to find.

Scripts are extremely useful to individuals. We are continuously bombarded with events that we need to process. Scripts enable us to recognize and to categorize them and to know what to do next.³⁵ We all have a deep-set need for control and predictability.³⁶ Scripts allow us to face new events and achieve predictability efficiently.

Categorizing Scripts: A Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework to categorize different types of scripts has been developed along three dimensions: distinctiveness, contingency, and hypotheticality.³⁷ Distinctiveness refers to the extent that a script component is unique to a particular situation. Greeting customers is common to a wide variety of services (low distinctiveness), but taking customers for a test drive is fairly distinct to car dealers.³⁸ Novices are likely to have scripts that are relatively undifferentiated³⁹ and are likely to invoke a generalized script to handle situations that differ in important respects.

Contingency refers to the extent that scripts contain "if-then" branches. A low-contingency, novice's script can be described as relatively flat with few branches or forks specifying alternative sequences. Experts are more adaptable and flexible because they have a greater number of contingencies stored.

The final dimension is hypotheticality—the extent to which the script is held at an abstract or concrete level. Experts abstract the key elements from their different experiences and generalize them, whereas novices keep their scripts at a concrete level.⁴⁰

Combining these dimensions gives a clearer definition of a novice and an expert consumer performer. A novice performer uses generalized scripts to handle situations that differ in important respects. Novices have scripts that have very little contingency and hence cannot cope easily with complex situations and tend to store scripts at a concrete level.

Expert performers tend to have highly distinctive scripts and hence have many distinct events in their knowledge structures. They store highly contingent scripts with many "if-then" branches and hold scripts at an abstract level. All of these script characteristics enable them to cope with complex and different situations.

Scripts, Consumer Performance, and Consumer Satisfaction

Combining the script logic with the idea of consumer performance can provide us with considerable insight. Scripts are the link between the operational efficiency of a service business and consumer performance. For greatest efficiency, the script to be followed by the service provider needs to be aligned with the script of the consumer.⁴¹ Expert consumers are more able to adapt to the service provider's script and hence to optimize the efficiency of the operation.

Scripts are also an extremely good way to think about consumer satisfaction. If satisfaction comes when expectations are met or exceeded, what do we mean by expectations? Using script theory, expectations are held in the form of script. If the service experience follows the expected script, then the consumer will be satisfied. That satisfaction will be enhanced because the experience is predictable and the consumer feels in control. If the performance unexpectedly exceeds the expectation, then the customer may well be delighted.⁴² Aligning consumer scripts with the service operation therefore has the double benefit of improving efficiency and increasing consumer satisfaction.

Managing Consumer Performance Scripts

Applying the script-theory logic would suggest five key tasks for management: audit your consumer performance expertise; increase your share of expert consumers; increase consumer loyalty; manage script changes carefully; and create systems to cope with novices and to use experts.

Audit Your Consumer Performance Expertise

Find out what percentage of your consumers are expert performers. The quality of a consumer's script can be measured through market research. The simplest approach is script elicitation in which individuals are merely asked to describe the relevant service experience in the form of a script.⁴³ Such an approach has proven to be sufficiently sensitive to differentiate between scripts of the same general category, as between scripts for a dining restaurant and a fast-food restaurant.⁴⁴ A score could then be computed comparing the company script with the elicited script.

An alternative approach relies on the reordering of events within the script. Respondents are presented with typical events in a jumbled fashion and asked to place them in the correct order. The expertise of consumers can then be assessed by

comparing their reordering with the correct order and computing a score.⁴⁵

Increase your Share of Expert Consumer Performers

Can service organizations help consumers become experts by teaching them the appropriate script? The cognitive psychologists suggest that scripts are built up from generalizations about experiences from early beginnings in life. As we grow up, we learn by watching others and literally having our behavior scripted by our parents. We may start off with a specific script for going out to a Wal-Mart, but we soon learn that this is only part of a higher general experience called shopping.

When faced with a new service experience, we adopt a number of strategies. The first thing we do is to approximate by *using an analogous experience*. In a study of consumer performance, an internet banking system was created. Consumers were deliberately selected who had no experience of such a system. Some of the respondents were asked to move money between accounts and to check balances, without any additional instructions.

Because the system was electronic, it was possible to measure their performance directly by measuring such aspects as transaction time and number of key-stroke errors. Respondents also completed a questionnaire about related service experiences. The results clearly showed that the best predictor of a consumer's internet banking performance was previous experience with banking, computers, and automatic teller machines.⁴⁶ Clearly the consumers were drawing on previous experience to create an approximate script. When creating a new service, organizations should give consumers clues about analogous services so that they can create a script quickly.

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The second thing that consumers do is to use *the service experience itself* to look for clues to a script. Those clues can come from many different sources: from the physical environment; from the service providers; or indeed from other customers. Consider something as prosaic as airline on-board lavatories. Customer satisfaction depends in part upon the occupied signs being lit or unlit so that

passengers can see the situation before leaving their seats. It is therefore important for passengers to lock the toilet door, hence triggering the occupied sign. How do the airlines ensure that this happens? They connect the door lock to the light switch. Some clues for consumers are less obvious, as in the strategic placement of tray return stands to ensure that consumers bus their own tables. Some electrical goods service organizations send all their customers checklists for them to prepare before calling in a service report.

Some service businesses offer instructions for use. A hotel will provide a directory of service to guests on how to use the hotel. Novel experiences such as health farms or Club Med holidays will offer a formal orientation program at the beginning of the guest's stay. All are designed to increase the level of expertise of consumer performance. Other orientation programs are less formal but just as useful. For example, service employees can be taught to recognize novice consumers and offer instructions. Bell-persons will often ask if you are new to the hotel and, if you are, offer instructions on how to use your room and the different styles of restaurants within the hotel.

The internet banking study described earlier took another sample of consumers and allowed them to develop expert scripts by providing written instructions and screen-based practice sessions. Their improvement in script compared to the novice group could be measured directly. The novice and expert groups were offered a jumbled set of statements describing the internet banking process and asked to place them in the correct order—in essence to reassemble the script. The expert group scored higher. They then made fewer mistakes when asked to use the system in earnest and were much more satisfied with the experience.⁴⁷

In a study of mammography exam screening, half of the respondents received a detailed preview of what would happen and a short video illustrating the entire procedure. The other half of the sample received no such preview. Then the respondents answered questions to assess their sense of control, their level of anxiety, and the accuracy of their expectations. All the women were then presented descriptions of three actual mammography experiences. One followed the preview exactly, one contained blunders by the provider, and the third described an enhanced service. The results showed that "teaching the script" through the preview generated more accurate expectations, considerably less anxiety, and higher levels of perceived control. Across all three scenarios,

those respondents with a preview were more satisfied with the described scenario.⁴⁸

The final source of a script can be *studying the behavior of the other consumers*. We learn from early youth to look for other, expert consumers and emulate their behavior. Tourists often adopt such a strategy. For example, they can be seen loitering outside Swiss banks learning how to use the complex security doors. There is a story, probably apocryphal, of McDonald's having trouble in the UK teaching consumers to clear their own tables. Their solution, allegedly, was to hire professional burger eaters who ate their food and, with exaggerated displays, emptied their trays into the bins and placed them on top of the receptacle.

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Increase Consumer Loyalty

Loyal customers are profitable to organizations for many reasons, such as word of mouth and pricing. For services, an extra reason is added: loyal customers can offer cost savings. Loyal customers are also much more likely to be expert customers. Consumers require multiple exposures to a service experience in order to learn the script expertly. Once the expert has been created, the firm must maintain that person's loyalty. Expert customers are valuable and must be protected, whether through loyalty incentive programs, such as frequent-flyer programs, or through recognition in the service experience.⁴⁹

Change Scripts Carefully

In the drive for operational efficiency, service businesses are often keen to innovate in the way that the service is delivered. If innovation involves a change of script, it needs to be managed carefully. Too big a change means that your expert consumers will have to renew their expertise. Expert consumers, with an existing script-based expectation, may see the new service as a service failure and be dissatisfied.

The Wendy's "instruction book" for queued-up patrons, described earlier, is a good example of a service business instinctively understanding the need to reprogram consumer scripts. Wendy's followed McDonald's into the UK market. The most important thing for Wendy's, in terms of operational efficiency and customer satisfaction, was to

reprogram customers. At that time, McDonald's offered a very constrained menu and a tightly defined script. The customer script was therefore very different at Wendy's. The absence of a new script would inevitably have reduced consumer performance, slowed down service, and created dissatisfaction.

As consumers we value predictability and control. We will therefore, in most cases, migrate toward a service experience where we know the script. We will look for props and signals in the way the stage is set in a service business, so as to judge whether this is a familiar script. This was precisely the problem faced by Citibank when it first introduced automatic teller machines into its New York branches. Regular customers would walk right past the empty ATM's to join the lines for the traditional tellers. The bank in the end hired receptionists who intercepted clients and encouraged them to use the ATM's.⁵⁰

The only exception to our desire for predictability seems to be when we deliberately look for something new. When foreign tourism automatically throws us into new situations, we become novices again and seem to enjoy the novelty of the experience. We may become exasperated by our inability to do the simplest of things—for example, to withdraw money from the bank. We may even revert to familiar scripts to refresh ourselves by seeking out a familiar restaurant chain or staying in a branded multi-national hotel. Branded chains offer us the predictability of a familiar script when we need it. A Holiday Inn feels like a Holiday Inn whether it is in Atlanta, London, or Kuala Lumpur.

Be Prepared for Both Novices and Experts

All service firms must learn to manage two different consumer segments at the same time: novices and experts. A firm cannot only have experts because it grows by recruiting new customers, and they are likely to be novices. Operationally, this means that the system has to cope with performance quality of two very different consumer types.⁵¹

All service firms must learn to manage two different consumer segments at the same time: novices and experts.

Unfortunately novices and experts do not arrive with labels identifying their level of consumer performance ability. One of the few places where this does happen is in on-line retailing. When regular

customers log in, they can be identified and the service experience customized to them. They receive fewer instructions and are flagged to use the short cuts within the system. Novice customers by comparison receive help boxes and guidance.

In the absence of an indication of performance expertise, all a service business can do is to allow users to self-select. The frequent traveler and user programs in the travel industry are good examples. The Hilton Honors "check-in" desk offers recognition to loyal customers. It also allows them to use their expertise to check in as efficiently as possible. The guests are often more proficient at the check-in script than the receptionists and can be seen anticipating the next question or indeed prompting the receptionists. The same effect is often visible at frequent-flyer check-ins, when expert passengers will answer the security questions before they are even asked.

To take full advantage of their expertise, Blockbuster did not hide the return bins from its expert customers. They were, after all, saving the staff time and effort. Staff were evidently advised instead to take some popular movies off the shelves and put them into the return bins. In this way their expert performers were rewarded by not having to search the shelves for these movies.

Coping with experts and novices means that the firm has to manage their interaction with each other. Not only can a novice with an incomplete script interfere with an expert by virtue of the novice's presence, but the scripts may be in direct conflict with each other. In a study of 330 service incidents, researchers looked at how the presence of others positively or negatively affected the service experience. Nearly half of the incidents described as satisfying or dissatisfying related to what was classified as "protocol." Many dissatisfying incidents referred to queuing when other customers clearly did not respect the protocol or script of acceptable behavior in a line.⁵² For example, "At EPCOT there was a couple that was trying to cut in front of us. . . ." Equally, when consumers agreed on the protocol or script, customers were satisfied: "There was no pushing or breaking in line to get ahead of others."

Future Directions

The script-theory perspective can offer insight today. However, at the heart of taking this idea forward is measurement. Using the script-theory ideas of distinctiveness, contingency, and hypotheticality, can a rigorous measure of consumer expertise be developed?

Measurement

The concept of consumer-choice expertise has already generated a measurement tradition.⁵³ It is based on a different model of how the mind works but has developed tried and tested tools of measurement.

Within the field of sales-force effectiveness, script-based expertise has been measured and related to concrete outcomes. Highly effective sales people described scripts that were more elaborate in terms of distinctiveness, contingency, and hypotheticality. As would be expected, the researchers found that these expert sales agents had the biggest advantage when encountering less typical sales situations.⁵⁴ Other studies of sales-force effectiveness have focused not on objective performance but on the adaptability and flexibility of sales presentations. Each has shown that expert script knowledge is related to more flexible sales presentations.⁵⁵

Segmentation

If consumer-performance experts can be identified, service organizations can see if any of the traditional segmentation measures of age and socioeconomic group can be related to the expert segments. In the context of e-business, organizations can measure consumer performance directly. Tracking consumer behaviors on a website enables categorizing them as experts objectively, at least in terms of their speed of use. Analysis has shown that experts do vary in terms of age, income, race, family status, and possibly region. More intriguingly, studying the same 20,000 users over six months showed that expert customers were more loyal.⁵⁶

Is a Script Enough?

Starting from a human resources perspective, consumers can be viewed as "partial employees."⁵⁷ New employees are normally "socialized" into the organization and, logically, these customer-employees should be socialized in the same way.⁵⁸ To be successful, new employees require a clear understanding of their roles. Similarly, the script-theory idea relates heavily to customers being clear about their roles. For both regular employees and customer-employees, the script that they are asked to perform must be within their abilities. If a home internet banking system requires too high a level of intelligence, it will alienate rather than attract customers.⁵⁹

If socialization can be achieved, then customers will understand the organization's policies and values, if not the script. Socialization has been related to positive outcomes for the firm, including customer satisfaction, motivation, and perceived quality.⁶⁰

Consumer Performance: The Key to Service Productivity

Managers from different functions need to change their thinking because of the script-theory model. Strategically, they must realize that the more consumers participate in producing their own services, the greater is the need to manage consumer performance. It is the only way to increase the productivity of such high-contact services. Experts and novices are more than just partial employees of the service business. They are employees and consumers at the same time.⁶¹ They can be accountable for their own satisfaction.

Managers from different functions need to change their thinking because of the script-theory model.

Marketing managers need to broaden the scope of their thinking. Traditionally, marketing drives value for the business by focusing on how consumers make choices and what satisfies them. Understanding the choice process provides the clues to increase the firm's share of those choices. Satisfied customers can be retained.

When thinking about services and the script logic, it is clear that the marketing toolkit can now be applied to improving the firm's operational efficiency by creating expert performers.

Experts can be created, scripts can be taught, and customers will see the results as a benefit. We are all motivated to learn by our need for control in our environment. Increasing the quality of consumer performance can for some of us increase that sense of predictability and control. For many of us, once we have learned the script, carrying our own bags on to the airline is an attractive proposition. What we fear is the novice flyers who argue that the locker directly above their seats is allocated to them!

Operations managers need to include the consumer in their planning. Starting from a more prescriptive point of view, it is important to be able to define an appropriate consumer script given the nature of the service operation. A number of attempts have been made to provide a theory which

will enable the service operation to be defined from the characteristics of the service.⁶² One such approach starts from the concept of uncertainty, discussed earlier, but defines uncertainty along two dimensions: the diversity of demand and the propensity of customers to participate. Drawing on research in hospitals,⁶³ this model suggests that consumer participation does itself influence uncertainty.

From this simple definition of uncertainty, the nature of the service production process can be identified and, from that, the appropriate script for the customer can be developed. This again touches on the issue of scripts delivered through technology, versus those through people.⁶⁴

Such a prescriptive model ties together the operational and marketing perspective in a script. It leaves for future research the question of how to motivate a customer to learn a script and perform it. Although high-participation or "self-service" scripts have been shown to be intrinsically attractive to some segments of consumers, others clearly want a monetary incentive.⁶⁵

The concept of a script can just as easily be applied to service providers.⁶⁶ They too have to cope with frequently occurring service experiences. Indeed, because they perform the script so often, they may be the ultimate experts. How provider and consumer scripts interact, what happens when an expert provider meets a novice consumer, and vice versa, are all key to designing satisfying experiences for consumers.

The human capital management systems need to be constructed to ensure that the service providers know and execute the correct script, which ensures that they are operationally efficient. The danger is that such frequently repeated scripts may produce mindless or robotic performance.⁶⁷ Processes and systems have to be created to balance off the needs of the service provider, the customer, and the firm. Service providers have to be experts, with scripts that can adapt to different levels of consumer performance expertise. Too much expertise may however create robot-like service.

Using the theatrical analogy, it is the script that ties together all of the different actors in the play. Actors using conflicting scripts cannot deliver a successful performance. The service script needs to be learned by all of the key players in the service experience. It is also the point on which the different functions in the service firm—operations, marketing, and human capital management—must converge. All the functions must be following the same script, and so must the consumers.

Endnotes

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² See Underhill, P. 1999. *Why we buy*. London: Orion Books: 91.

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John Bateson is Group Chief Executive of SHL PLC, a world-leading multi-national company in the use of psychology for the assessment of individuals' competencies and competency potential. Prior to SHL he was a senior vice president in Cap Gemini Ernst and Young, and before that he was a university professor. He has written extensively on the application of consumer psychology to the management of service businesses. Contact: John.Bateson@SHLGROUP.com.