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MORE THAN HAPPY TO HELP? CUSTOMER-FOCUSED EMOTION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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This paper investigates the impact of customer service representative (CSR) customer-focused emotion management strategies on expressed customer emotions, beyond the influences of emotional contagion. We propose that problem-focused strategies (situation modification and cognitive change) are likely to reduce the intensity of negative customer emotions and increase the intensity of positive customer emotions, whereas emotion-focused strategies (attentional deployment and modulating the emotional response) will have the opposite impact. Further, we propose that customer negative emotions will affect the choice of strategies CSRs employ. Based on evaluator ratings of recorded customer service calls ($N = 228$), our findings confirmed the positive effects of problem-focused strategies and the negative effects of emotion-focused strategies on customer-expressed emotions. In addition, we found that initial customer emotions affected the strategy used by the CSR, whereby negative emotions expressed by the customer reduced the use of the most effective strategy and increased the use of the least effective strategy.

Customer emotions have been an important topic of study in the service industry for decades. Hochschild (1983) pioneered this research by investigating the requirements that organizations place on employees to control their own emotional expressions in order to manage customer emotions. This work led to the study of emotional contagion, defined

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as the impact of customer service representatives' (CSR) emotional expressions on customer emotions. Research on emotional contagion has shown that CSR emotional expressions are an important predictor of customer emotions (Barger & Grandey, 2006; Pugh, 2001). What remains unclear, however, is how CSR behaviors affect customer emotions, particularly initially negative ones. In customer-oriented services, having to deal with negative customers is a common occurrence. According to published statistics, CSRs report that, on average, they are subjected to verbal aggression by customers 10 times a day (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). Given that service providers understand the importance of customer emotions in that they can impede or facilitate service delivery (Locke, 1996), what do CSRs do to encourage more positive interactions, and further, what influences this behavior?

Despite the widespread acceptance among both academics and practitioners regarding the effectiveness of emotional contagion in increasing positive interactions (i.e., Barger & Grandey, 2006; Pugh, 2001), 70% of customers interacting with a service agent in order to report/resolve problems experience intense negative emotion at the end of the interaction (Customer Care Alliance, 2005). This suggests that CSR efforts directed at positive emotional contagion may not be sufficient and that organizational research needs to focus on the effect CSR behaviors have on customer emotions. Further, it suggests that, although some CSR behaviors aimed at helping customers deal with their problems are effective, some may have damaging consequences. These issues will be addressed in this study through the following three objectives: (a) identifying effective and detrimental CSR behaviors that affect customer emotional expression over and above the effects of emotional contagion, (b) investigating the impact of initial customer emotions on the behaviors of the CSR, and (c) exploring how the use of multiple strategies affects customer emotions. To achieve these objectives, we integrate coping assistance and interpersonal emotion management (IEM) theories.

Coping involves attempting to manage stressors that cause negative emotions. Customers, for example, who experience intense negative emotions, are incited by various stressors. The coping literature has long recognized that interactions with others are an integral part of managing negative emotions and encouraging positive ones, and that individuals can aid others in their emotion management (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Researchers have highlighted the importance of investigating active participation in another individual's stress-management efforts, referred to as coping assistance, within the framework of emotion- and problem-focused coping (Cohen, 1992; Thoits, 1986). "Problem-focused coping" refers to attempts to directly manipulate a stressor or the perceptions of it, whereas "emotion-focused coping" relies on actions intended to prevent,

minimize, or reduce the expressions of negative emotions that result from a stressful circumstance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

IEM strategies derive from Gross's (1998) work on personal emotion management and the notion that individuals manage others' emotions at work using the same tactics that they use to manage their own emotions (Francis, 1997; Lively, 2000; Niven, Totterdell, & Holman, 2009). Williams (2007) outlined four IEM strategies used by boundary spanners to manage others' emotions: situation modification (changing, removing, or altering a problem to remove the emotional impact) and cognitive change (reappraising a situation or problem as more positive), which we position as problem-focused strategies, and attentional deployment (directing the target's attention to something more pleasant) and modulating the emotional response (influencing emotional response tendencies), positioned as emotion-focused strategies.

In the process of integrating these theoretical frameworks, we advance research on emotions in the service industry in several important ways. First, research on the management of others' emotions is just beginning to emerge in the academic literature (see Williams, 2007). As such, the majority of research on both IEM and coping assistance has been observational and theoretical (for an exception, see Little, Kluemper, Nelson, & Gooty, 2011). Very little is known about how IEM strategies actually affect (and are affected by) others' emotions. As customer emotions have been shown to be particularly impactful on customer satisfaction, purchasing behavior, and other factors important to organizational success (van Dolen, de Ruyter, & Lemmink, 2004), we extend IEM literature to investigate the impact of IEM strategies on customer emotions.

Second, by integrating coping assistance and IEM literature, we develop theory to explain *why* some strategies may have negative consequences in the service industry, whereas others produce opposite results. Williams (2007) suggested that IEM strategies are aimed at reducing others' negative emotions but does not consider that these behaviors may have negative outcomes. Thus, developing theory that addresses both positive and negative outcomes may help CSRs understand the implications of their behaviors when dealing with customers. Third, the impact of the customer's expressed emotion on the strategy used by the CSR has not been studied. We investigate the hypothesized (and yet, ironic) notion that more negative emotions expressed by the customer lead to a less effective use of emotion management strategies, which lends additional practical significance to the study. If our hypotheses are supported, these results may help to better understand how negative customer emotional displays lead the CSRs to engage in less (rather than more) effective IEM strategies.

Finally, previous work has not considered that IEM strategies may interact in affecting customers' emotions. In a post hoc analysis, we explore

the impact of the interactions between strategies on emotions expressed by the customer. Specifically, we seek to investigate the impact on customer emotions when CSRs employ a combination of IEM strategies. In the sections that follow, we present the integration of coping and IEM literature, our hypotheses, results including post hoc analyses, and a discussion that delineates the implications of these results for CSRs' effectiveness in managing customers' negative emotions.

Theory and Hypotheses

Coping is defined as cognitive or behavioral efforts to manage specific demands that are seen as taxing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Demands can be managed by self or through others' assistance, a process known as coping assistance (Cohen, 1988, 1992; Thoits, 1986). Through coping assistance, agents suggest techniques for stress management and participate directly in efforts to help manage stress of the target (Thoits, 1986). Thus, coping assistance can help foster additional target appraisal of the stressor. According to the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), when targets (i.e., the customers) experience negative events (e.g., receive a collections notice, are billed incorrectly, etc.), they go through an appraisal process. If a negative appraisal ensues, distress symptoms characterized by negative affect and emotions will emerge. At this point, targets will seek help from an agent (i.e., the CSR). When confronted by negative targets, the agent can engage in behaviors that assist the target in coping with their emotions or choose to address the problem directly. Because a fundamental aspect of the job is to encourage positive emotions in the customer, a CSR may ask a negative customer to relax or create small talk to lighten the mood (focusing on the target's emotions). Alternatively, a CSR may attempt to address the customer's problem directly or explain how the problem came about (focusing on the cause of the target's emotions). This assistance, then, restarts the appraisal process and subsequently affects ensuing emotions.

Weaving together the IEM and coping assistance literature, in this work, we position situation modification and cognitive change as two problem-focused strategies, with attentional deployment and modulating the emotional response as two emotion-focused strategies. Despite the nomenclature, strategies aimed at managing others' emotion can be either problem or emotion focused because these strategies are based on the theory that emotions originate from a salient antecedent cause (Forgas, 2002; Watson & Clark, 1992). Thus, if an individual addresses the antecedent directly, they are engaged in problem-focused strategies. On the other hand, if the emotion itself is addressed, the strategy is emotion focused.

Problem-Focused Strategies

Situation modification involves changing or altering the situation to reduce undesired negative emotions and increase positive ones. Agents using situation modification will do everything they can to remove, modify, or change aspects of the situation negatively affecting target's emotions. This strategy deals directly with the source of stress and resides in the problem-focused domain. Certainly, situation modification is a widely utilized strategy in the customer service industry, given that most customers contact CSRs due to problems they have experienced. For example, a CSR could offer to send a replacement product to customers having trouble with their current item. When CSRs modify the situation to solve or address the customer's problem, the customer will likely appraise the situation as less stressful, leading to less intense negative expressed emotions and more intense positive ones. In this case, the CSR helps reduce the customers' stress, which should, in turn, positively affect their emotions. We predict that, when CSRs use situation modification, customers will express more intense positive emotions and less intense negatives ones at the end of the customer service interaction. Research in developmental psychology has shown that problem-focused interventions aimed at targets' negative states have been found to be related to reduced negative states and increased positive states (Barden, Garber, Leiman, Ford, & Masters, 1985). It should be noted that each of the hypotheses presented in this manuscript control for positive and negative expressed emotions on the part of both the customer and the CSR at the beginning of the service interaction, thereby assessing the effect of IEM strategies after controlling for the effect of emotional contagion.

Hypothesis 1a: Situation modification is negatively related to customer-expressed negative emotions at the end of the service call.

Hypothesis 1b: Situation modification is positively related to customer-expressed positive emotions at the end of the service call.

Although perhaps less evident than situation modification in the service industry, we contend that cognitive change is a behavioral strategy that can also positively affect customer emotions. Cognitive change involves altering the customer's perspective regarding the problem or reframing the problem in order to make it subjectively less stressful. When using cognitive change, an agent exhibits behaviors that put situations in perspective for the target. For example, a customer may call to complain about not receiving a product, and the service representative responds that bad weather across the country has delayed all shipments. By

attempting to change the target's perception of the problem, this strategy also addresses the problem directly and, thus, is problem focused. During the subsequent appraisal process, the target should appraise the problem less negatively and, by the end of the interaction, express more intense positive emotions and less intense negative ones. Although cognitive change does not involve solving the problem (as does situation modification), the CSR is providing an alternative explanation for the problem and thereby reducing the negative appraisal initially made by the customer. Again, research in developmental psychology has shown that problem-focused interventions aimed at altering targets' negative states have been found to be the most effective in actually reducing the negative states and increasing positive one (Barden et al., 1985). Thus, we hypothesize that these problem-focused strategies will be related to more intense positive emotions and less intense negative ones.

Hypothesis 2a: Cognitive change is negatively related to customer-expressed negative emotions at the end of the service call.

Hypothesis 2a: Cognitive change is positively related to customer-expressed positive emotions at the end of the service call.

Emotion-Focused Strategies

Attentional deployment involves distracting the target's attention from the cause of undesired negative emotions. This strategy ignores the cause of the problem and solely focuses on improving the customer's emotions using alternative stimuli. Thus, the initial problem persists, as does the customer's original perception of it. With attentional deployment, CSR effort is focused on directly changing the customer's emotions. For example, the CSR may tell a joke or try to engage the customer in small talk to distract them. In this case, the CSR is focused on directly affecting the customer's emotions rather than altering the problem or the customer's perception of the cause of dissatisfaction. We predict that although this strategy may temporarily distract the customer, it will not reduce their negative emotional expressions. Because attentional deployment does not directly address the problem, the customer will have no new information during the subsequent appraisal process, and thus, he or she will not evaluate the situation more positively.

Furthermore, we predict that when this strategy is used, the customer will actually express more intense negative emotions and less intense positive emotions because of the inherent demands involved in the distraction. Very few authors have investigated distraction techniques used by CSRs (Winsted, 2000). However, Surprenant and Solomon (1987) found that

the more off-task information (i.e., forms of small talk, including discussions of the weather and other nonfunctional commentary) included in a service encounter, the lower the customer evaluations of trustworthiness, employee competence, and satisfaction with effectiveness. The authors reasoned that distraction techniques, such as small talk, are disruptive, particularly if they require the customer to respond in kind. As a result, the customer must expend more effort on the interaction, resulting in resource depletion. Resource depletion, in turn, has been related to lack of self-control and impairments in self-presentation (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). Thus, as attentional deployment does not provide the customer with a way to reappraise the situation, the negative appraisal persists. Attentional deployment also further taxes customers and reduces self-control of their negative emotions. Consequently, CSR behavior aimed at distraction is likely to lead to more negative expressed emotions.

Hypothesis 3a: Attentional deployment is positively related to customer-expressed negative emotions at the end of the service call.

Hypothesis 3b: Attentional deployment is negatively related to customer-expressed positive emotions at the end of the service call.

Modulating the emotional response involves the CSR attempting to suppress negative customer emotions. A CSR adopting this strategy may, thus, tell a customer to "take a deep breath" or "calm down." Agents who use modulating the emotional response suggest strategies for targets aimed at not expressing their undesired emotions. In a customer service industry, where suggestions for biological modification (i.e., exercise) are not practical, a CSR may interrupt a caller on a negative rant or suggest to an upset customer to relax. These types of attempts at managing a target's emotions often involve "making it clear [that one] do[es] not care how the target feels," a strategy aimed at reducing the target's expressions of these feelings (Niven et al., 2009, p. 504). Modulating the emotional response ignores the problem entirely and focuses on reducing the expressions of negative emotions by the customer and thus is emotion focused. Marketing research has shown that satisfaction suffers when service representatives do not display concern for their customers (Winsted, 2000). In addition, because modulating the emotional response does not address the problem, the customer will have no new information during the subsequent appraisal process and will not appraise the situation more positively at the end of the interaction with the CSR.

Just as attentional deployment, this technique is taxing. In experimental settings, study participants told to suppress their emotions have been found to have greater cognitive costs than those that have not (Richards & Gross,

2000). Because resource depletion impairs self-presentation and control (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Vohs et al., 2005), CSR behavior aimed at modulating the emotional response will relate positively to negative expressed emotions in the customer.

Hypothesis 4a: Modulating the emotional response is positively related to customer-expressed negative emotions at the end of the service call.

Hypothesis 4b: Modulating the emotional response is negatively related to customer-expressed positive emotions at the end of the service call.

Negative Customer Emotions and CSR Behavior

We were also interested in investigating influences on the choice of IEM strategy used by the CSR. As discussed earlier, the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) suggests that when customers experience a negative event, they go through an appraisal process and subsequently experience stress. This process similarly affects CSRs when they encounter negative customers. Specifically, when CSRs interact with negative customers, they appraise the situation and begin to experience negative emotions and distress symptoms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), resulting in emotional dissonance in CSRs (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Grandey et al., 2004; Tschan, Rochat, & Zapf, 2005; Wegge, Vogt, & Wecking, 2007).

Emotional dissonance represents incongruence between the organizational expectations of the CSRs to consistently exhibit positive emotions (i.e., being positive with the customer) and the actually experienced negative emotions (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional dissonance has been shown to lead to a change in CSR behavior, often resulting in decreased helpfulness (Wegge et al., 2007) and a reduction in the performance quality (Bakker & Heuven, 2006; Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000; Zapf, 2002). Thus, we propose that negative emotions expressed by the customer result in CSR emotional dissonance, which will affect the choice of IEM strategy used. Specifically, CSRs exposed to negative customer emotional expressions may focus more directly on this source of dissonance. This should increase their use of emotion-focused IEM strategies and decrease their use of problem-focused strategies

Hypotheses 5: Customers' initial expressed negative emotions are negatively related to situation modification (5a) and cognitive change (5b).

Hypotheses 6: Customers' initial expressed negative emotions are positively related to attentional deployment (6a) and modulating the emotional response (6b).

Method

Participants and Procedure

As part of a comprehensive research effort, a medical billing organization located in the southeastern United States agreed to participate in this research study in exchange for summary information. Our level of analysis was incoming customer service phone calls ($N = 228$), audio recorded during the single working day of 40 CSRs. The recordings began as soon as a phone call was initiated and ended when the caller hung up. Employees were billing account representatives that provided billing support for their medical clients. Only phone calls that were at least 2 minutes long and in which a customer expressed some level of negative emotions at the beginning of the call were subjected to the subsequent analysis. In total, we recorded 556 incoming calls, 312 of which were more than 2 minutes long. Within those 312 calls, we verified that no two calls involved the same caller (which might impact the nonindependence of the customer ratings). Calls ranged from 2 minutes long to 15 minutes and 8 seconds ($M = 4$ minutes, 6 seconds; $Mdn = 3$ minutes, 23 seconds; $SD = 2$ minutes, 16 seconds). We chose 2 minutes as the minimum duration, as having sufficient time to interact with the customer is necessary for a CSR to sense negative emotions, employ IEM strategies, and affect the customer's emotions. As there is no guidance in the literature regarding the amount of time necessary, we offer 2 minutes as a reasonable minimum threshold for telephone-based customer service interactions of the sort used in this study.[1]

Because the purpose of our study was to investigate strategies used by CSRs to help customers manage negative emotions, we recruited undergraduate student volunteers from a large southeastern university as raters tasked to determine which calls contained customers who expressed some negative emotions at the beginning of the call. Each student rater participated in a 20-minute training session. Raters were familiarized with the job description on which the interviews were based, reviewed the

[1]Two academics familiar with related research in the areas of management and marketing were contacted regarding an appropriate minimum threshold for call length. Although unaware of an existing cutoff value applied in previous studies, both expressed concern that a cutoff was necessary given the theoretical processes involved in this study, and both agreed that 2 minutes (although arbitrary) would represent an appropriate minimum call length.

constructs they would be rating, and learned to use the structured rating scales employed in the study. As a part of this study, 305 students rated the level of expressed negative emotions by the customer at the beginning of the call. Each student rated approximately 5 of the 312 calls, resulting in about five ratings per call. First, we averaged the negative expressed emotions per call from the student ratings and retained those calls in which the average negative expressed emotions exceeded 1 on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *person was monotone lacked intensity*; 5 = *very negative tone to voice, negative intensity, anxiousness, anger, frustration apparent*), indicating some level of expressed negative emotions on each call.[2] Of the 312 calls rated, 84 did not contain expressed negative emotions and were subsequently removed from the sample. Thus, our final sample consisted of 228 calls.

In recognition of the fact that idiosyncratic rater differences may affect ratings (Gehrlein, Dipboye, & Shahani, 1993), we hired two independent raters with extensive experience as customer service managers. According to Campion, Palmer, and Campion (1997), rater validity is maximized and independence is assured by having the same rater evaluate all calls, and more skilled raters are likely to make more accurate judgments (Motowidlo et al., 1992). In addition to the training administered to the student raters described earlier, these expert raters were asked to rate five pilot audio recorded calls as practice. One rater assessed the employee-related variables (situation modification, cognitive change, attentional deployment, modulating the emotional response, and the control variables—positive and negative emotions at the beginning of the call), while the other rated customer-related variables (positive and negative emotions at the end of the call, and the controls—positive and negative emotions at the beginning of the call). As each rater rated each call, and because customer-related and employee-related variables were obtained from different sources, this design allowed for a greater degree of standardization across calls as well as for the reduction of common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Although only expert ratings were used to test our hypotheses, 615 students were asked to rate either the customer-related constructs or the representative-related constructs for each of the calls. Each student rater evaluated approximately five calls, resulting in five separate ratings of each call. We then calculated average measures interclass correlation coefficient (ICC, 2) values using one-way analyses of variance and

[2]We chose this cutoff to allow for the greatest potential variance in customer negative expressed emotions, which still allowed us to classify these individuals as displaying some negative emotions. We also performed the analysis using cutoffs of 1.5 and 2 and found the same pattern of results with respect to the emotion- and problem-focused strategies and customer expressed emotions.

found these values were significantly related to ratings of the experts (see Table 1).

Measures

CSR interpersonal emotions management strategies. Anchored rating scales were used to measure IEM strategies. Anchored rating scales use descriptions to illustrate scale points to reduce ambiguity and semantic differences and enhance rater objectivity, implicitly increasing reliability while reducing contamination and deficiency (Campion et al., 1997). As, according to Campion, Campion, and Hudson (1994), the most reliable and valid approach to anchored rating scales is to use multiple types of anchors, we developed single-item structured measures for each construct. To develop these structured measures, we randomly chose calls to listen to, during which time, we identified examples of each strategy and translated them into descriptions of three anchors for each scale. Specifically, we used a 5-point rating scale with anchored responses corresponding to low (1), moderate (3), and high (5) response options.

The response scales were used to assess the four emotion management strategies (two types of problem- and emotion-focused coping assistance) of the CSR throughout the entire customer interaction. Each call was rated for each strategy. An example structured anchor for situation modification is "5-High-Employee did all they could to solve the customer's problem. Employee changed the situation to remove the negative impact on the customer." An example structured anchor for cognitive change is "5-High-The employee told the customer to keep things in perspective. The employee directly referred to the customer's problem as minor or something he or she shouldn't worry about." Similarly, "5-High-The employee told a joke or jokes. The employee changed the subject to something more positive. The employee talked about something unrelated to the issue the customer was calling about." is an example of structured anchor for attentional deployment. Finally, a modulating emotional response example is "5-High-The employee asked the customer to calm down. The employee asked the customer to take a deep breath. The employee asked the customer to lower his/her voice or not to speak in a particular tone."

Customer expressed emotions. The positive expressed emotions and negative expressed emotions scales were assessed by an independent rater, who rated all customer-related constructs. This expert rater (as well as the student raters rating the same constructs) was given descriptions of what constitutes positive and negative emotions and was trained in recognizing the different types of emotions. Support has been found for coders' abilities to judge emotions through verbal tone (Barsade, 2002). Adhering to the Watson and Tellegen (1985) framework, which casts positive and

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intraclass Correlation Coefficients

Variable	*M*	*SD*	ICC(2)a	ICC(2)b	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. CSR BPE	1.46	.64	.76	.55										
2. CSR BNE	1.05	.24	.40	.32	−.16									
3. Customer BPE	1.71	.78	.65	.46	.19	−.06								
4. Customer BNE	1.54[a]	.84	.61	.59	−.08	.10	−.52							
5. Situation modification	3.06	1.18	.64	.52	.14	−.09	.13	−.17						
6. Cognitive change	1.14	.46	.48	.44	.13	−.03	.04	.00	.01					
7. Attentional deployment	1.09	.38	.69	.59	.07	−.05	−.05	.11	.13	.11				
8. Modulating the emotional response	1.22	.58	.44	.48	−.14	.04	−.13	.26	−.07	.01	.02			
9. Customer EPE	1.96	.84	.74	.61	.27	−.12	.39	−.26	.39	−.06	.00	−.07		
10. Customer ENE	1.42	.82	.75	.68	−.21	.11	−.16	.35	−.30	.12	−.08	−.26	−.55	
11. Call length (sec)	227.30	109.48	–		−.08	.02	.00	−.08	−.01	−.04	−.12	.09	−.06	.04

Note. [a]Research has found the mean of audio recording ratings of an individual in an extremely stressful situation to be 4 on a 7-point Likert scale (Streeter, Macdonald, Apple, Krauss, & Galotti, 1983). Thus, these results are in line with our expectations.
$N = 228$, For correlations greater than $|.13|$ $p < .05$; for correlations greater than $|.17|$ $p < .01$.
BPE = beginning positive emotions; BNE = beginning negative emotions; EPE = end positive emotions; ENE = end negative emotions; ICC(2)a = ICC(2) value averaged across all raters; ICC(2)b = ICC(2) value with aggregated student ratings and expert rater.

negative emotions as two factors, and consistent with other measures of emotions (PANAS-X), raters were asked to indicate the level of participants' positive and negative emotions from 1, which represented "very monotone with little emotion" to 5, which represented "a very positive tone of voice, positive intensity, friendliness, and warmth" (for positive emotions) or "a very negative tone, with negative intensity, anxiousness, fear, or frustration" (for negative emotions). The ICCs (see Table 1) show consistency across raters and support the reliability of the procedures used.

Control variables. Although, to our knowledge, no extant studies have investigated the contagion effect of CSR-expressed negative emotions on customer's emotions, research on group mood has indicated positive and negative contagion effects (Barsade, 2002). Thus, we controlled for both. Because we posited that CSR behavior would affect customer emotions beyond CSR expressed emotions, this study assessed the impact of IEM strategies on customer emotions beyond the effects of both positive and negative emotional contagion on the part of the CSR, as well the effects of positive and negative emotional contagion on the part of the customer, which could affect the CSR.

In addition, because customer emotions at the beginning of the call (i.e., the opening statement) are likely related to customer emotions at the end of the call, we also controlled for customer positive and negative expressed emotions at the beginning of the call. Finally, as extensively long calls are thought to anger customers, call center representatives are often given specific instructions regarding the maximum acceptable call length (Witt, Andrews, & Carlson, 2004), call length was calculated (in seconds) from the time the CSR picked up the phone (to take an incoming call) to the time he or she hung it up.

Results

Analyses were conducted using path analysis in Mplus 6.11 with the Huber-White (Huber, 1967; White, 1982) sandwich estimator to account for possible nonindependence.[3] Nonindependence was not an issue for customers (no customer was a participant in more than one call) or raters (one expert rater rated all customer-oriented variables; the other rated all employee-oriented variables). However, nonindependence was possible in our data due to cases in which one employee participated in more than one call. The Huber-White sandwich estimator provides parameter estimates and standard errors that do not differ from those of bootstrapped parameter estimates and standard errors (see Muthén & Muthén, 2007). Consistent with prior research (e.g., Boone, van Olffen, & van Witteloostuijn, 2005;

[3]Because our hypothesized and post hoc models were fully identified, we do not report fit statistics.

TABLE 2
Regression Results Investigating the Impact of IEM Strategies on Customer Emotion at the End of the Call

	Customer ENE	Customer EPE
Call length	.04	−.07
Customer BNE	.27*	−.05
Customer BPE	.07	.29**
CSR BNE	.05	−.05
CSR BPE	−.13**	.17**
Situation modification	−.25**	.33**
Cognitive change	−.08**	−.03
Attentional deployment	.15*	−.09+
Modulating the emotional response	.16*	.03

Note. $N = 228$.
BPE = beginning positive emotion; BNE = beginning negative emotions; EPE = end positive emotions; ENE = end negative emotions.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Bottom, Holloway, Miller, Mislin, & Whitford, 2006; Kilduff, Crossland, Tsai, & Krackhardt, 2008), we chose this statistical technique, rather than hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), as HLM requires more assumptions regarding the distribution of the error terms (Primo, Jacobsmeier, & Milyo, 2007) and provides little added value to a model such as ours that has no Level-2 predictor.

Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. We first confirmed the expected negative relationship between positive emotions and negative emotions within individuals. Our results indicate that CSRs' beginning negative emotions and positive emotions ($r = –.16$, $p < .05$), the customers' beginning negative emotions and positive emotions ($r = –.52$, $p < .01$), and the customers' end negative emotions and positive emotions ($r = −.55$, $p < .01$) are moderately correlated with one another, suggesting a clear distinction between positive and negative emotions. Next, we evaluated the expected positive relationship of positive and negative emotions between the beginning and the end of the call. Specifically, path analytic estimates (presented in Table 2) of customers' beginning and end negative emotions ($\boldsymbol{\gamma} = .27$, $p < .05$) and customers' beginning and end positive emotions ($\gamma = .29$, $p < .01$) demonstrate moderate consistency from the beginning to the end of the call. It is also noteworthy that results reveal no relationship between customers' beginning negative emotions and end positive emotions, or beginning positive emotions and end negative emotions ($\gamma = –.05$, *ns*, $\gamma = .07$, *ns*, respectively). These findings imply that positive and negative emotional expressions are not related across time.

We were also interested in assessing the effect of emotional contagion. The extant emotional contagion research has focused primarily on positive emotions affecting the positive emotions, attitudes, and behavior of others (e.g., Barger & Grandey, 2006; Pugh, 2001). Thus, in order to fill this gap in pertinent knowledge, in addition to assessing the impact of positive CSRs' emotions on positive customer emotional expressions, we also assessed the effect of CSRs' and negative customers' emotions by assessing the impact of CSRs' beginning negative emotions and beginning positive emotions on customers' end negative emotions and end positive emotions. As expected, CSRs' beginning positive emotions are related to both customers' end positive emotions ($\gamma = .17, p < .01$) and customers' end negative emotions ($\gamma = –.13, p < .01$), suggesting that employees' positive emotions influenced both customers' positive and negative emotions. CSRs' beginning negative emotions had no effect on customers' end positive emotions or end negative emotions ($\gamma = –.05$, *ns*, $\gamma = .05$, *ns*, respectively), indicating that contagion does not stem from negative emotional displays. Finally, path analytic results showed no relationship between call length and customer end positive emotions or end negative emotions ($\gamma = –.07$, *ns*, $\gamma = .04$, *ns*, respectively).

Hypotheses 1a and 1b, which stated that situation modification would be negatively related to customers' end negative emotions and positively related to end positive emotions (while controlling for employees' and customers' beginning negative emotions, beginning positive emotions, and call length), were supported ($\gamma = –.25, p < .01$; $\gamma = .33, p < .01$; respectively). Hypothesis 2a was also supported, as cognitive change was negatively related to customers' end negative emotions ($\gamma = –.08, p < .01$). However, Hypothesis 2b was not supported, as we found no relationship between cognitive change and customers' end positive emotions ($\gamma = –.03$, *ns*). Hypotheses 3a and 4a were supported, as attentional deployment and modulating the emotional response were positively related to customers' end negative emotions ($\gamma = .15, p < .05$; $\gamma = .16, p < .05$, respectively). Attentional deployment was negatively related to customers' end positive emotions, marginally supporting Hypothesis 3b ($\gamma = –.09, p < .10$). However, Hypothesis 4b was not supported, as modulating the emotional response was not related to customers' end positive emotions ($\gamma = .03$, *ns*).

Again, using Mplus 6.11 with the Huber-White sandwich estimator, we regressed customer beginning negative emotions onto each of the four IEM strategies. Once again, we controlled for CSRs' beginning negative emotions and beginning positive emotions as well as call length. Results (given in Table 3) indicated a negative relationship between customers' beginning negative emotions and situation modification ($\gamma = –.15, p < .05$) and a positive relationship between customers' beginning negative

TABLE 3
Regression Results Investigating the Impact of Initial Customer Emotion on IEM Strategy

	Situation modification	Cognitive change	Attentional deployment	Modulating the emotional response
Call length	.01	.06	−.03	.10
CSR BNE	−.05	−.01	−.05*	−.00
CSR BPE	.12*	.13	.07	−.11*
Customer BNE	−.15*	.02	.12+	.26**

Note. $N = 228$.
BPE = beginning positive emotion; BNE = beginning negative emotions; EPE = end positive emotions; ENE = end negative emotions.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

emotions and modulating the emotional response ($\gamma = .26$, $p < .01$), providing support for Hypothesis 5a and 6b, respectively. Customers' beginning negative emotions, however, did not affect the use of cognitive change or attentional deployment, indicating a lack of support for Hypotheses 5b and 6a.

Post Hoc Analyses

We conducted post hoc analyses to explore the interaction effects of the IEM strategies. Although these strategies are not highly correlated (suggesting, e.g., that CSRs are not using high levels of multiple strategies in the same call), there were some cases in which more than one strategy was being used. Using MPlus 6.11, the Huber-White sandwich estimator, and the same controls as employed in the primary analyses, we investigated the effect of the six two-way interactions of the four strategies on both positive and negative customer emotions. As can be seen in Tables 4 and 5, this was followed by the application of a series of regression equations. Step 1 included only the IEM strategies and the controls. Each Step 2 regression equation included one of the interaction terms. The regression results indicated one significant interaction: the interaction term representing attentional deployment and modulating the emotional response significantly affected negative emotions. Next, in order to graph this interaction (see Figure 1), the control variables and IEM strategies were mean centered. We then calculated the significance of each of the slopes using one standard deviation above and below the mean for attentional deployment. The slope of the line representing high attentional deployment is significant (gradient = 1.52, $p < .05$), but the slope of the line representing low attentional deployment is not (gradient = –1.04, *ns*).

TABLE 4
Regression Results Investigating the Impact of the Six Two-Way Interactions on Customer Negative Emotion at the End of the Call

	Customer ENE						
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 2	Step 2	Step 2	Step 2	Step 2
Intercept	1.74	1.74	1.74	1.73	1.75	1.74	1.74
Call length	.04	.04	.04	.04	.03	.02	.04
Customer BNE	.27*	.27*	.27*	.27*	.27*	.27*	.27*
Customer BPE	.07	.07	.07	.08	.09	.06	.07
CSR BNE	.05	.05	.05	.04	.05	.05	.05
CSR BPE	−.13**	−.13**	−.13**	−.13**	−.13**	−.12**	−.13**
Situation modification	−.25**	−.25**	−.25**	−.25**	−.26**	−.23**	−.25**
Cognitive change	−.08**	−.08*	−.08	−.07*	−.07*	−.06	−.08*
Attentional deployment	.15*	.15	.15*	.14*	.18*	.15**	.14*
Modulating the emotional response	.16*	.16*	.16*	.14*	.15*	.17**	.16*
SM × AD		−.01					
SM × CC			.02				
SM × MER				−.08			
AD × CC					−.11		
AD × MER						.28**	
CC × MER							−.04
R2	.26**	.26**	.26**	.26**	.27**	.33**	.27**

Note. $N = 228$.
SM = situation modification; CC = cognitive change; AD = attentional deployment; MER = modification of emotional response; BPE = beginning positive emotion; BNE = beginning negative emotions; EPE = end positive emotions; ENE = end negative emotions.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Employee beginning positive emotions were found to be positively related to situation modification ($\gamma = .12$, $p < .05$) and negatively related to modulating the emotional response ($\gamma = -.11$, $p < .05$). Similarly, employees' beginning negative emotions were found to be positively related to attentional deployment ($\gamma = -.05$, $p < .05$), suggesting that encouraging CSRs to express positive emotions can also help them effectively utilize more beneficial IEM strategies.

Discussion

Managing customer emotions is an integral component of customer service jobs.

Unfortunately, stories and statistics of customer aggression and intense negative emotions—as well as their negative consequences—abound (e.g., Customer Care Alliance, 2005). Reports suggest not only that displays of negative customer emotions are a widespread problem but that CSRs use inappropriate and even counterproductive strategies to combat them. These findings further suggest that some management and training efforts

TABLE 5
Regression Results Investigating the Impact of the Six Two-Way Interactions on Customer Positive Emotion at the End of the Call

	Customer EPE						
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 2	Step 2	Step 2	Step 2	Step 2
Intercept	2.32	2.33	2.32	2.33	2.32	2.33	2.33
Call length	−.07	−.07*	−.06*	−.07*	−.06	−.06	−.07*
Customer BNE	−.05	−.04	−.05	−.04	−.05	−.05	−.05
Customer BPE	.29**	.29**	.29**	.28**	.28**	.29**	.28**
CSR BNE	−.05	−.05	−.05	−.04	−.05	−.05	−.05
CSR BPE	.17**	.17**	.17**	.17**	.17**	.17**	.17**
Situation modification	.33**	.34**	.33**	.33**	.34**	.33**	.34**
Cognitive change	−.09+	−.03	−.02	−.04	−.04	−.04	−.04
Attentional deployment	−.03	−.05	−.09	−.09	−.12*	−.10+	−.10+
Modulating the emotional response	.03	.03	.03	.05	.04	.03	.03
SM × AD		−.08					
SM × CC			−.04				
SM × MER				.08			
AD × CC					.08		
AD × MER						−.07	
CC × MER							−.06
R2	.31**	.32**	.32**	.32**	.32**	.32**	.32**

Note. $N = 228$.
SM = situation modification; CC = cognitive change; AD = attentional deployment; MER = modification of emotional response; BPE = beginning positive emotion; BNE = beginning negative emotions; EPE = end positive emotions; ENE = end negative emotions.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

may be ineffective and, perhaps, potentially harmful. Although CSRs regularly deal with negative customers (Grandey et al., 2004) and are told by the organizations to satisfy these customers, they are less frequently provided guidance on how to do so beyond simply acting in a positive manner. In this work, we extended the emotional labor, coping assistance, and IEM literature by categorizing specific strategies CSRs use as emotion focused and problem focused and providing evidence as to which strategies are effective and detrimental in this context. Further, we show that initial customer emotion influences the use of IEM strategies as well as explore the interaction effects of the strategies on customer emotions.

When CSRs used problem-focused strategies, the results were positive; however, the two problem-focused strategies seemed to work in unique ways. Not surprisingly, when situation modification was used by the CSR, the customer's negative emotions were less intense, and the customer's positive emotions were more pronounced—both good outcomes from the encounter. Suppose a customer calls to complain that charges on his bill are too high. The CSR does everything she can to solve the problem, which then impacts the customer's initial negative and positive emotions. Clearly, situation modification can be a "win" for both parties, and the good news

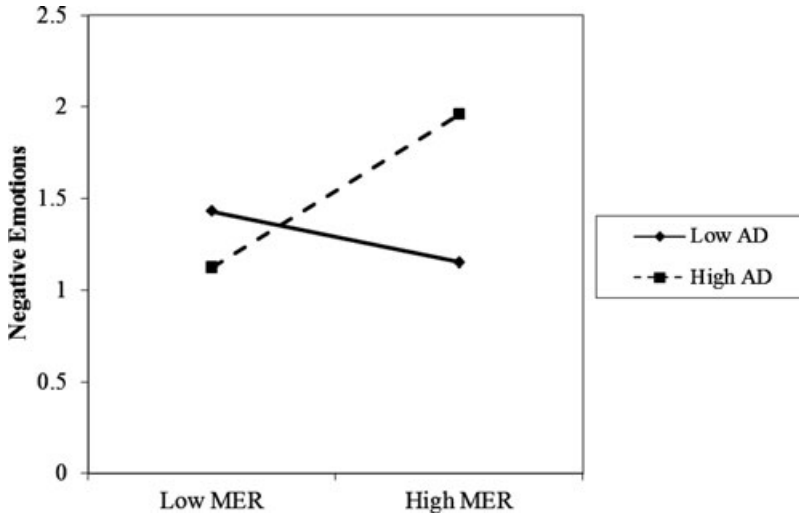

Figure 1: **Interaction Effects of Attentional Deployment and Modulating the Emotional Response on Negative Emotions.**

Note. MER = modulating the emotional response; AD = attentional deployment.

is that many CSRs are engaging in these types of behaviors. However, it seems CSR behavior is not limited to strategies directed at solving the problem. Thus, it is important to understand the impact of the other techniques employed by CSRs when dealing with difficult customers as well.

The other problem-focused strategy, cognitive change, presented a different pattern of results. Suppose, for example, a customer calls the medical billing agency and is upset about receiving a collection notice, saying that her insurance company should pay the bill. The CSR explains that collection notices are automatically generated by the system, often too quickly. The CSR advises the customer that her insurance may still pay the bill, reassuring the customer that there is no reason to worry about the notice. This reappraisal strategy is intended to help the customer reframe the situation as less stressful, but it does not actually solve the customer's problem. According to our results, the customer's negative emotions would be less intense at the end of the call; however, she would not experience enhanced positive emotions. Simply put, although it will not make the customer more positive, cognitive change may make a customer less negative. This is an important finding because reducing negative emotions is critical, given all the negative outcomes that customers' expressed negative emotions can produce. In summary, although both problem-focused coping strategies are effective, they operate in different ways.

Interestingly, our results indicated that the emotion-focused strategies resulted in more intense negative expressed emotions and, therefore, may be counterproductive. In our sample of CSRs, a variety of attentional deployment methods were used, each aimed at distracting the customer from the cause of the undesirable emotions. CSRs asked about the weather, told a joke, or upon hearing a dog bark in the background asked the customer about his dog and what kind it was. Attempts to distract the customer in this way were not only ineffective but were detrimental; attentional deployment was associated with less intense positive customer emotions and more intense negative emotions. These findings may be particularly useful in the customer service sector, where many organizations train their employees to engage in small talk and other distraction techniques, under a mistaken belief that these are helpful strategies for dealing with difficult customers. Clearly, this kind of training can actually be extremely counterproductive and increase the expressions of negative emotions.

Similarly, in modulating the emotional response, the second emotion-focused strategy also appeared counterproductive. When CSRs used expressions such as "Calm down, sir," customers' negative emotions became more intense. These strategies distract from the problem and from the purpose of the call and lead to greater expressed negative emotions by the customer. We reason that these negative emotions are due to increased cognitive load, which lowers self-control. This suggests that CSRs should avoid dealing with customer emotions directly and should instead focus on solving or reappraising the problem directly. Although CSRs may be using these strategies with the best intentions, that is, as an attempt to reduce the negative emotions expressed by the customer, hoping to experience less aggression or less intense negative emotions from the customer, these strategies, unfortunately, have the opposite effect.

Taken together, the results show that managing customer emotions using a problem-focused strategy positively affects customer emotions, beyond the effects of emotional contagion. Not surprisingly, situational modification, or doing all one can do to solve the problem, enhanced positive emotions and diminished negative emotions. Reframing the problem successfully reduced customers' negative emotions but did not make the customer express more positive emotions. Neither of the emotion-focused strategies were found effective, as both resulted in increasing the customers' negative emotions. This finding may help explain some of the intense negative emotions among customers that seem to be all too common in the service industry (Customer Care Alliance, 2005).

Results concerning the choice of IEM strategies by CSRs underscored the practical importance of these findings. We found that, when customers called, expressing more intense negative emotions, representatives tended to use effective techniques less! Thus, in circumstances when situation

modification would likely be most effective, CSRs reduced their effort directed toward solving the problem. In addition, when customers expressed more intense negative emotions, representatives relied more often on modulating the emotional response, which exacerbated the situation by increasing expressed negative emotions. As one anonymous customer stated,

> Under any circumstance, being told to "just relax" is something that I would find presumptuous and rude, even if the person addressing me was someone with whom I was acquainted. I find it especially galling to be spoken to in that manner by one of your employees.

This strategy sends a message that the service representative does not care about the customer's feelings, which increases the negative emotions felt by that customer. Thus, in our study, the "squeaky wheel" did not get the grease but received suggestions to calm down rather than best efforts directed at solving his or her problem.

For managers in customer service organizations, our results provide guidance on helping CSRs deal with customer emotions. Few managers would be surprised by the recommendation that situational modification, focusing on doing all one can do to solve the problem, should be the default strategy for managing the customer's emotions. We found that CSRs tend to use situation modification more than the other strategies, which seems to suggest that training and development that encourages CSRs to engage in this strategy should continue. The implications regarding the other strategies, however, may be counter to current practices in the industry. For example, Eikenhout and Austin (2005) observed small talk (a form of attentional deployment) in 29% of customer service interactions. Our results suggest that any tactics that distract the customer from the problem might backfire in terms of fanning the flames of negative emotions.

Beyond established practices to positively affect customer emotions through positive emotional displays (fostering positive emotional contagion), training should be expanded to include teaching reappraisal techniques while avoiding the emotion-focused strategies, attentional deployment, and modulating the emotional response. Although these results are preliminary and future research should seek to replicate our findings in different contexts, customer service organizations training their CSRs to engage in small talk should rethink this practice and focus on training CSRs to reappraise problems for customers. Although CSRs may think that they are helping by distracting customers from their negative emotions, they are mistaken—such strategies make the customer even more negative. Similarly, telling customers to calm down or to relax is detrimental.

The reduced use of situation modification when dealing with negative customers may represent emotional regulation failure on the part of the CSR and points to the need to study behaviors (rather than just emotions) in customer service interactions. Managers that closely monitor CSR expressed emotions to ensure compliance with organizational norms may not realize other effects of self-regulation failure. Our study indicates that CSRs displayed very little negative emotions ($M = 1.05$; $SD = .24$); however, our results suggest that CSRs experienced emotion regulation failure and, rather than expressing negative emotions, they reduced the quality of service provided to negative customers. Furthermore, likely because of the lack of negative expressions from the CSR, we found no negative emotional contagion. Through these passive-aggressive behaviors, however, CSRs may actually be increasing negative customer emotions. Future research should investigate this passive-aggressive response more directly.

Our post hoc results indicated only one significant interaction effect, suggesting that the impact of the majority of these strategies does not change based on what other strategies are used. The one exception is when both emotion-focused strategies (attentional deployment and modulating the emotional response) are used. The plot of this significant interaction suggests that negative emotions expressed by the customer are more intense when the CSR engages in both emotion-focused strategies. These results help bolster one of our key overarching arguments, that emotion-focused IEM strategies result in negative customer outcomes.

Future Research and Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. First, it was conducted within one organization and focused exclusively on verbal interactions. Future research should assess the generalizability of our findings, extending IEM strategies to face-to-face interactions, other types of customer interactions, and even to interpersonal interactions beyond that of employees and customers, such as interactions among coworkers or supervisor–subordinate dyads. As the efficacy of each of these techniques may be situation specific (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), investigating the strategies in other contexts is needed. Although the emotion-focused strategies were less effective in our study, they might be effective in other contexts within the customer service industry, such as a flight attendant dealing with a frightened passenger, or in situations when solving or reappraising problems is more difficult.

Customers likely have expectations concerning CSRs' ability to address problems. These possibilities should be assessed in future studies along with an investigation of the effectiveness of problem- and

emotion-focused strategies when such expectations do not exist. Similarly, studies should take into account whether or not the problem presented by the customer is solvable, because if it is, problem-focused strategies may be effective, otherwise emotion-focused strategies may be called for. Although it was not evidenced in our recordings, it is possible that CSRs use other types of problem- and emotion-focused strategies to help customers cope. Our study focused on the effects of IEM strategies on short-term expressed customer emotions. Future research should assess the long-term effects of these strategies on a variety of resulting attitudes and behaviors, such as customer satisfaction and consumer future purchasing behavior. Our study assessed only calls longer than 2 minutes, so that we could eliminate calls too simple to elicit any emotion management strategy. Future research could investigate these hypotheses in the context of shorter calls to see if the results differ.

Although we assessed the impact of the use of more than one strategy in our post hoc analyses, it is possible that the sequence in which these strategies are used is important. Future research should investigate whether or not the order in which a CSR uses the IEM strategies affects emotional outcomes. In addition, for consistency with previous research on emotional contagion, we investigated the impact of IEM strategies on emotions at the end of the call while controlling for the initial customer emotions. Future research should investigate the impact of IEM strategies on change in emotion using latent growth modeling or a similar analysis. A final limitation of this study is that it focused exclusively on expressed rather than felt emotions. Although we feel investigating expressed emotions fills a great need in that expressed emotions have a large impact on organizationally important variables (e.g., customer dissatisfaction, employee turnover, emotional exhaustion, etc.), assessing felt and expressed emotions with customers and representatives alike would add richness to our understanding of these processes. Similarly, future research should investigate outcomes such as customer satisfaction more directly. In addition, future studies should include CSRs' abilities, such as emotional intelligence, in examining the process of helping others cope.

Conclusion

Our results have implications for researchers who study emotion work and indicate that the emotional exchange between customers and service representatives goes beyond simple emotional contagion. Our findings also suggest that CSRs should concentrate their efforts toward not only being positive but also changing or reappraising the situation, even when the customer is behaving particularly negatively. Finally, CSRs aiming

to further increase positive customer emotional displays and decrease negative emotional displays should avoid distracting and focusing on the customer's emotional response (particularly when used in combination).

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