



Positive social behaviors and suggestive selling in the same service encounter

Positive social
behaviors

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine customers' reactions in service encounters in which the customer contact person (CCP) initially engages in positive social behaviors and then turns to suggestive selling.

Design/methodology/approach – An experimental between-subjects design was employed. The participants interacted in a service encounter with a CCP who engaged in positive social behaviors. At the end of the service encounter, participants were exposed to: no suggestive selling; congruent suggestive selling; or incongruent suggestive selling.

Findings – Customers' intentions to buy additional products were lower in the two suggestive selling conditions than in the condition without suggestive selling. This outcome should be viewed in light of the contrast effect that occurs when the CCP's role comprises both rapport-building activities and sales activities: suggestive selling near the end of a service encounter may "break the spell" of initial positive social behaviors. However, in terms of the customer's attitude toward the CCP, it was mainly the incongruent suggestive sales attempt that had a negative effect, presumably because congruent suggestive selling contrasts less with positive social behaviors than incongruent suggestive selling.

Originality/value – Researchers have acknowledged that many CCPs who are instructed to engage in positive social behaviors in service encounters are under increasing pressure to also actively engage in sales efforts. However, few studies have examined the reactions of customers exposed to both activities within the same service encounter.

Keywords The service encounter, Suggestive selling, Cross-selling, Customers, Behaviour

Paper type Research paper

In many service firms, the customer contact person (CCP) is instructed to engage in positive social behaviors (e.g. displaying positive affect, smiling, making eye contact, greeting the customer, and expressing empathy) in service encounters. This appears to be a wise practice – many researchers have shown that such behaviors have a positive impact on customers' evaluations of the firm (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Ford, 1995; Gabbott and Hogg, 2000; Gremler and Gwinner, 2008; Pugh, 2001; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008; Winsted, 2000).

However, the instructions given to CCPs have evolved over time. In other words, the scripts (Tansik and Smith, 1991) or specifications (Pinto and Johnston, 2004) prescribed by management to control CCP behavior in the service encounter are changing. Changes in this area reflect novelty in firms' internal dealings, and they have been labeled "organizational innovation" in the service literature (Camarero and Garrido, 2012), "administrative innovation" in the general marketing literature (Han *et al.*, 1998), and "process innovation" in the management literature (Friedrich *et al.*, 2010). More

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specifically, CCPs are increasingly instructed to more actively engage in sales activities during service encounters (Aksin and Harker, 1999; Evans *et al.*, 1999; Korczynski *et al.*, 2000). Jarrar and Neely (2002) refer to this as “the sales through service concept.”

In this paper, we focus on one particular type of sales activity in the service encounter – suggestive selling – which is sometimes referred to as cross-selling (i.e. offering an additional item to a customer after that customer has already decided to buy one or several items). As service innovations are characterized as offerings that have not previously been made available to a firm’s customers (Gebauer *et al.*, 2008), it is possible to view the change from providing service in the traditional sense to providing service and engaging in explicit suggestive sales attempts as a novel way of delivering services to customers. In any event, instructions for CCPs to engage in suggestive selling have become increasingly prevalent in many firms (Aksin and Harker, 1999; Ebster *et al.*, 2006; Jarrar and Neely, 2002; Jasmand *et al.*, 2012; Mundt *et al.*, 2006; Shah *et al.*, 2012; Sizoo *et al.*, 2005). For example, Office Depot instructs its CCPs to attempt to cross-sell at least two items or attachments in each customer encounter (Peters, 2011).

The extant research indicates that suggestive selling is a cost-efficient practice – one question along the lines of “Would you like wine with your meal?” can have a notable impact on sales (Ebster *et al.*, 2006; Martinko *et al.*, 1989; Milligan and Hantula, 2005; Ralis and O’Brien, 1986). Some practitioners, such as McCarthy (2008), even view suggestive selling in a positive light from the customer’s point of view; with this view, suggestive selling is “enhancing” the customer’s experience. A similar view exists among some researchers. Polonsky *et al.* (2000), for example, refer to suggestive selling as “a type of personal customer service” and as a “customer-oriented selling practice.”

However, is suggestive selling really a sound practice given that the CCP is also expected to engage in positive social behaviors? Can the two activities co-exist without having conflicting effects on the customer? The recent changes in instruction content blur the boundary between providing service and producing sales, a shift that it is creating tension for CCPs (Jasmand *et al.*, 2012). Given the nature of services, particularly in the sense that they are often created while the customer is present, customers must also be aware that the boundary is becoming blurred. Some research suggests that this knowledge may have negative effects on customers. For example, Ebster *et al.* (2006) claim that customers might not always appreciate a sales clerk responding to an order by suggesting a related item. Furthermore, Aksin and Harker (1999) believe that suggestive selling can have detrimental effects on customer service. However, empirical studies of customers’ reactions to CCPs’ dual responsibilities are in short supply.

A main assumption in this study is that when CCPs perform both activities within the same service encounter, it is likely to produce contrasting impressions of that encounter for the customer. More specifically, a CCP who successfully builds rapport by engaging in positive social behaviors and then makes an explicit sales attempt may induce a feeling in the customer that the rapport-building efforts were not authentic but merely a means to a commercial end. Presumably, the sales effort may “break the spell” of the initial rapport-building efforts – and it may even backfire. In addition, the view that service firms are challenged to redefine themselves as experience creators (Sigala and Christou, 2006) might lead us to expect an even greater potential for contrasts.

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine customers’ reactions to service encounters in which the CCP initially engages in positive social behaviors and then turns to suggestive selling. In contrast to some extant studies dealing with the various organizational effects of the dual role of the CCP as a service provider and a sales

person (e.g. Aksin and Harker, 1999), this study focusses explicitly on effects in terms of customer reactions. Moreover, this study should be viewed as a response to Ostrom *et al.*'s (2010) call for more research on business models for growth in services (suggestive selling is viewed as a straightforward way to increase revenue in many service firms) and on the challenges CCPs face in terms of matching customer needs with company offerings. More generally, researchers in the service field have been relatively silent with regards to CCPs' sales activities. Although the traditional notion of a "service" has indeed been challenged by the emergence of the service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), this logic contains little reference to sales activities (Le Meunier-FitzHugh *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, this study contributes by attempting to offer a view of customer reactions to service encounters in which both service and sales activities exist within the same frame.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

As already indicated, a CCP's positive social behaviors in a service encounter comprise highly potent factors that can have a significant impact on the customer's evaluation. Several specific aspects of such social behaviors have been examined (e.g. greetings, smiles, eye contact, listening, empathy, and courtesy). Indeed, the number of specific factors is so extensive that researchers have yet to adopt a common label for them. Several general labels have been offered thus far, such as "the human contact aspect" (Goodwin and Smith, 1990), "the human factor" (Lemmink and Mattsson, 1998), "the social content" (Mittal and Lassar, 1996), "the social side" (Butcher *et al.*, 2003), "the relational dimension" (Levesque and McDougall, 1996), and "the relational component" (Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1993; Roberts and Campbell, 2007).

In this paper, we assume that the effects of the CCP's social behaviors on the customer's evaluation of the service encounter are a function of the customer's general categorization for positive social interactions. More specifically, in line with the category-based information-processing model (Henthorne *et al.*, 1992; Smith and Zárate, 1992) and given that the CCP's positively charged social behaviors in the service encounter typically mirror positive behaviors in social interactions in general, we assume that: the CCP's behavior makes the customer's general category for positive social interactions accessible; and the (positive) content in this category informs the customer's evaluation of the CCP in a value-congruent way. In contrast, an explicit sales attempt is unlikely to be part of the customer's general category for positive social behaviors. Indeed, we assume that explicit selling outside commercial contexts is a negatively charged behavior. This is reflected in many customers' negative reactions to being exposed to sales attempts in unexpected places, such as in their homes and in public places.

Moreover, we assume that suggestive selling is unlikely to be a part of the customer's more specific category for positive social behaviors within service encounters. Such categories are sometimes referred to as "scripts" in the service literature (Tansik and Smith, 1991). The lack of suggestive selling content in such specific categories is mirrored in service research aiming to identify satisfaction-creating factors in service encounters. In most studies covering a wide range of factors, suggestive selling is not identified as an antecedent to satisfaction (e.g. Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Gwinner *et al.*, 1998; Winsted, 2000). Given that suggestive selling is an explicit sales technique designed to be applied near the end of an encounter, it is also important to note that previous research has found that the absence of an explicit closing technique produces a higher level of trust than several commonly used closing techniques (Hawes *et al.*, 1996).

Even though few studies have explicitly assessed the impact of suggestive selling attempts on customers' overall evaluations of service encounters, some authors suggest that the presence of such attempts has a negative effect. For example, Darian *et al.* (2001) find that most customers do not like salespeople who suggest that they should also buy unrequested items, while Ebster *et al.* (2006) acknowledge that suggestive selling can lead to resistance from customers. Winsted's (2000) empirical study shows that interacting with service persons "interested in business only" is a negatively charged experience for customers. In addition, many of the exemplary service firms that establish high standards for "out-of-the-box" customer service (see Bitner and Brown, 2008) do not appear to use salient suggestive selling within the frame of service encounters.

Given not only the absence of explicit suggestive sales activities from customers' general categories for positive social behaviors, but also their absence from customers' more specific categories for positive social behaviors in service encounters, we assume that suggestive selling is unexpected and unwelcome in service encounters in which CCPs engage in positive social behaviors. We also believe that customers may associate suggestive selling with negative social behaviors, such as behaviors aimed at controlling another person's behavior. As suggestive selling comprises a situation in which the CCP is trying to impose his or her will on the customer, suggestive selling can be interpreted as entailing a threat of reduced control and a loss of freedom, which in turn results in a negatively charged state of mind (Clee and Wicklund, 1980). Several service studies also highlight a negative association between customer-perceived control and the customer's overall evaluation (McGuire *et al.*, 2010; Ward and Barnes, 2001). In the light of these arguments, we expect that a CCP engaging in positive social behaviors will be evaluated more positively when he or she does not engage in suggestive selling.

However, the negative impact of suggestive selling on the customer's evaluation is likely to be moderated by the type of suggestive selling attempt. One aspect that appears to have particularly strong moderating potential is the relationship between: the first item (or items) that the customer decides to buy and the additional item (or items) suggested by the CCP. Ebster *et al.* (2006) show that suggestive selling is more effective in situations where the suggested item has "a good fit" with the original item. We therefore expect that the higher the level of fit, the less the customer's evaluation of the CCP will be negatively affected by suggestive selling. This is in line with service research that stresses the importance of complementarity among individual services (e.g. one service enhances customer satisfaction with another service) when service bundles are designed (Guiltinan, 1987) and when supporting services are introduced in relation to a core service (Woolf, 2008). Related evidence of a "good-fit effect" is found in research on brand extensions in the sense that a relatively low level of perceived fit between the original brand and the extension typically has a negative impact on the customer's evaluation of the extension (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Park *et al.*, 1991). The same pattern has been identified for service brand extensions (Martinez and Pina, 2005). One explanation is that a low level of fit (i.e. a high level of incongruence) requires more information processing; it requires the customer to retrieve additional information from long-term memory to develop an understanding of the specific stimulus, and it generates more offer-related thoughts (Goodstein, 1993; Heckler and Childers, 1992; Lee and Mason, 1999). This is likely to negatively affect evaluations. Furthermore, we assume that a high level of congruence is perceived as less threatening to individual freedom than a low level of congruence. Therefore, we assume that the relatively higher magnitude of the threat contributes to a higher causal potency in the case of a low level of congruence.

Therefore, in a service encounter in which the CCP initially engages in positive social behaviors, we expect: suggestive selling to negatively affect the customer's evaluation of the CCP; and incongruent suggestive selling to negatively affect the evaluation more than congruent suggestive selling. We thus hypothesize the following:

- H1.* In a service encounter in which the CCP engages in positive social behaviors, the customer's evaluation of the CCP is higher in the absence of suggestive selling than in the presence of congruent or incongruent suggestive selling.
- H2.* In a service encounter in which the CCP engages in positive social behaviors, congruent suggestive selling produces a higher customer evaluation of the CCP than incongruent suggestive selling.

In addition, given a positive association between the customer's evaluation of the supplier and the customer's cross-buying activities related to that supplier – an association that has been found in terms of behavioral intentions (Soureli *et al.*, 2008) and behavior (Li *et al.*, 2005) – we expect a customer's positive evaluation of the CCP to have a positive impact on the customer's willingness to purchase additional items from that CCP. Consequently, when the CCP's positive social behaviors are followed by a suggestive selling attempt, we expect the willingness to buy the suggested item to be lower than in a situation where no such suggestion is made. We deal with this willingness in terms of the customer's intention to purchase an additional item within the frame of the service encounter. We expect the same pattern as for evaluations:

- H3.* In a service encounter in which the CCP engages in positive social behaviors, the customer's intentions to purchase an additional item are higher in the absence of suggestive selling than in the presence of congruent or incongruent suggestive selling.
- H4.* In a service encounter in which the CCP engages in positive social behaviors, congruent suggestive selling produces higher customer intentions to purchase an additional item than incongruent suggestive selling.

The similarities in the expected patterns for evaluations of the CCP (*H1* and *H2*) and intentions (*H3* and *H4*) do not necessarily mean that suggestive selling will affect evaluations and intentions to the same extent. As already noted, suggestive selling can be interpreted as threatening a loss of freedom, which typically results in a negatively charged state of mind (Clee and Wicklund, 1980). However, suggestive selling does not seem to threaten one's freedom in forming evaluations of the CCP to the same extent as it threatens one's freedom to behave in various ways, as the suggestive selling attempt is a request for a certain behavior. Given that intent represents a response more closely related to behavior than evaluations, we expect suggestive selling to negatively affect intentions to a greater extent than evaluations. No explicit hypotheses are formulated in this regard, but we examine the issue in our analysis.

Research method

We employed an experimental between-subjects design in which the participants interacted in a service encounter with a CCP who engaged in positive social behaviors.

Near the end of this service encounter, each participant was exposed to: no suggestive selling, congruent suggestive selling, or incongruent suggestive selling from the CCP.

Stimulus development and participants

To create the stimuli, we used a role-play scenario approach in which we asked participants to assume the role of a customer who is interacting with a CCP. Such scenarios frequently appear in research on service encounters (e.g. Bitner, 1990; Dallimore *et al.*, 2007; Karande *et al.*, 2007; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008). They have also been used to evaluate different sales techniques (Hawes *et al.*, 1996).

As the empirical context for our service-encounter scenario, we employed a bookstore setting. Books (i.e. goods) may appear to be a somewhat unusual product choice for examining service encounters, at least from the traditional perspective of what services comprise. However, this decision was influenced by the service-dominant logic in which goods are distribution mechanisms for services. In other words, tangible goods are seen as appliances for service provision rather than as ends in themselves (Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Our text-based scenario began with a customer who visited a bookstore to purchase one particular book, *Rich Girls*, which is a collection of short stories by Silke Scheuermann. The CCP, a female sales person, actively engaged in several positive social behaviors: she listened to the customer, she was emphatic, and she expressed an interest in the customer's needs in a polite and friendly way. This resulted in the customer purchasing the book despite the fact that the customer had expressed some preference for novels rather than short stories.

Everything was identical among the treatment groups up to this point in the scenario. The no suggestive selling version of the scenario ended when the customer purchased the book (see the Appendix). To obtain manipulations of the two types of suggestive selling, we decided to view congruence in terms of product feature similarity (see Park *et al.*, 1991). More specifically, we assumed that an additional book by the same author with a similar theme represented a relatively higher level of congruence than an additional book by a different author and with a different theme. Therefore, the congruent suggestive selling version of the scenario ended with the CCP suggesting that the customer should also buy another book by the same author and with a similar theme. In this scenario, the sales person stated:

By the way, Silke Scheuermann has written another book, which is a novel: *The Hour between Dog and Wolf*. It is about the relationship between two sisters, two very different persons, who have not been in touch for several years. Love is also a theme in that book. Would you like to have it, too? It's available in paperback for EUR 9.

The incongruent suggestive selling version ended with the CCP suggesting that the customer should also buy a book by another author with a different theme, stating:

By the way, Simon Kernick has written a book, which is a novel: *The Last Ten Seconds*. It is an action-packed thriller about an undercover policeman embedded in a criminal gang planning to rescue a brutal serial killer, known as "The Night Creeper", from the police. All action takes place within 48 hours. Here, the theme is staying alive. Would you like to have it, too? It's available in paperback for EUR 9.

In contrast to some previous studies of the effects of suggestive selling attempts, the attempt in our case was embedded in a service encounter comprising other elements of social interaction (to simulate positive social behaviors from the service person). As this also helped to make the manipulation less obvious (see Aronson and

Carlsmith, 1968; Weber and Cook, 1972), it is likely to have reduced the participants' opportunities to correctly guess the specific hypotheses of the experiment. After completing the scenario, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, which measured the response variables.

We recruited the participants ($N=140$; 59 males, 81 females; mean age = 22.87) from undergraduate and practitioner-oriented courses in marketing. The participants were randomly allocated to one of the three scenarios. Thus, as in many other experiments, we used a convenience sample consisting of course participants rather than a random sample. The main rationale for doing so was the same as in Calder *et al.* (1981), Petty and Cacioppo (1996), and Webster and Kervin (1971).

Measures

To check the manipulation, we decided to avoid items explicitly dealing with suggestive selling because we did not want to provide the participants with input that might enable them to guess the specific purpose of the study (Aronson and Carlsmith, 1968; Weber and Cook, 1972). Instead, we used an adjective-based item related to the participants' perception of the CCP, which was scored from 1 (relationship oriented) to 10 (task oriented). We assumed that the suggestive selling conditions would result in higher scores for this variable than the condition in which suggestive selling was absent.

To assess the impact of suggestive selling on the response variables, we measured the participants' evaluation of the CCP using a measure of the attitude toward the CCP. We used the following adjective pairs scored on a ten-point scale: bad-good, dislike her-like her, unpleasant-pleasant, and negative impression-positive impression. Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.93. With regards to the intent to buy an additional item, we measured the participants' intentions to also buy another book using three adjective pairs (unlikely-likely, improbable-probable, and impossible-possible) scored on a ten-point scale ($\alpha = 0.92$). These three response items were the same for each scenario, but the question preceding them differed: "How likely is it that you would have also purchased another book?" was used for the scenario without suggestive selling, while "How likely is it that you would have also purchased *The Hour between the Dog and the Wolf* by Silke Scheuermann?" was used for the congruent suggestive selling version, and "How likely is it that you would have also purchased *The Last Ten Seconds* by Simon Kernick?" was used for the incongruent suggestive selling version.

Analysis and results

The manipulation was checked using the relationship-orientation vs task-orientation item. The response to this item was lowest in the condition without suggestive selling ($M = 4.06$), it was relatively higher for the congruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 4.54$), and it was highest for the incongruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 4.92$). A one-way ANOVA indicated that the means were not equal ($F = 3.59$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the manipulation behaved as expected.

The cell means for the response variables (the attitude toward the CCP and behavioral intentions) in the three experimental conditions are presented in Table I.

Response variable	None	Type of suggestive selling	
		Congruent	Incongruent
Attitude toward the CCP	8.54	8.33	7.52
Intention to purchase another book	6.71	5.46	3.80

Table I.
Mean responses for the three experimental conditions

To test *H1*, we used a one-way ANOVA to assess the impact of the three scenario versions on attitudes toward the CCP. The overall outcome was significant ($F = 6.16$, $p < 0.1$). A pair-wise mean comparison with a Scheffé test revealed that attitudes in the condition without suggestive selling ($M = 8.54$) were significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) than in the incongruent condition ($M = 7.52$), but they were not significantly higher ($p = 0.80$) than in the congruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 8.33$). Thus, only incongruent suggestive selling reduced the evaluations of the CCP relative to the condition without suggestion selling. This provides only partial support for *H1*. With regard to *H2*, the congruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 8.33$) and the incongruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 7.52$) produced significantly different levels for attitudes toward the CCP ($p < 0.05$). *H2* is thus supported.

As for *H3* and *H4*, which deal with the intentions to purchase an additional product, the overall difference in the level of intent among the three treatment groups was significant ($F = 24.28$, $p < 0.01$). The level of intent in the condition without suggestive selling ($M = 6.71$) was significantly higher ($p < 0.05$) than in the congruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 5.46$) and significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) than in the incongruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 3.80$). This provides support for *H3*. Moreover, the level of intent in the congruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 5.46$) was significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) than in the incongruent suggestive selling condition ($M = 3.80$). Therefore, *H4* is also supported.

We have suggested that suggestive selling might have a stronger impact on intentions than on evaluations because a behavioral request may imply a stronger threat of a loss of freedom than the loss of freedom associated with forming evaluations. Therefore, the behavioral request could be more causally potent in its negative impact on intentions than in its negative impact on evaluations (given that intentions are more closely related to behavior than evaluations of the CCP). The results provide evidence supporting this suggestion; the effect was indeed stronger for intentions ($\eta^2 = 0.26$) than for attitudes toward the CCP ($\eta^2 = 0.08$) across the treatment groups.

Discussion

Summary of the main results

The pattern of the cell means in Table I shows that the attitude toward the CCP and intentions to purchase an additional item were highest for the condition without suggestive selling. The second highest levels were obtained for the congruent suggestive selling condition, while the incongruent suggestive selling condition produced the lowest levels.

However, one difference between the conditions was not significant – congruent suggestive selling did not significantly reduce customers' attitudes toward the CCP. Our initial concern that suggestive selling may “break the spell” of positive social behaviors should thus be conditioned by the type of suggestive selling. Given our categorization-based explanation, the incongruent suggestive selling approach seems particularly likely to introduce alien elements *vis-à-vis* the customer's general category for positive social behaviors. It therefore has greater potential to “break the spell.”

An additional finding was that the differences among the conditions were more profound for intentions to purchase an additional product than for attitudes toward the CCP. With respect to intention levels, the CCP approach without suggestive selling outperformed the two suggestive selling approaches.

Contributions

Many authors stress the importance of service innovations for an organization's competitiveness (e.g. Gebauer *et al.*, 2008; Ordanini and Parasuraman, 2011). Indeed, many service firms are continuously changing their offerings. This study has dealt with one incremental innovation related to service encounters: firms' increasing emphasis on the need for CCPs to not only deliver service in the traditional sense but to also make explicit sales attempts. Our examination of this aspect makes a contribution to the literature on service innovations in the sense that much of the research in this area has been concerned with technology-based changes with the potential to produce major changes in firms' offerings. However, relatively minor changes in work routines are more likely to be adopted by firms, and therefore they also deserve attention – particularly when they significantly affect customers.

Our study also contributes to the service literature in which the increasing sales content in service encounters is acknowledged as creating a conflict for CCPs (Evans *et al.*, 1999; Jasmand *et al.*, 2012). Yet few studies have examined customers' reactions to CCPs' dual service and sales responsibilities in service encounters, a gap this paper begins to rectify. In other words, given that recent conceptualizations of service comprise "benefits of another entity or the entity itself" (Vargo and Lush, 2004), we deal with effects in terms of another entity (i.e. the customer).

Moreover, our findings contribute to the general service-encounter literature, which has been remarkably silent about the fact that selling in various forms is an increasingly important part of the CCP's duties. In fact, sales activities are invisible in comprehensive reviews of service marketing research, such as Kunz and Hogreve (2011). At the same time, service-encounter research has produced a long list of various positive social behaviors (smiles, greetings, empathy, etc.) capable of having an impact on customers. In this regard, the lack of focus on selling duties could be misleading for service firms given that these firms wish to capitalize on research results when they instruct CCPs to engage in cross-selling. Given our results and the deficit of sales content in existing service research, we therefore believe that it is time for service research to incorporate sales-related aspects of service encounters. Furthermore, the literature on personal selling, which often addresses face-to-face encounters, has dealt with the impact of various sales activities (e.g. Hawes *et al.*, 1996). However, this literature typically ignores the service content of such encounters. It seems likely, then, that these two fields of research would benefit from a higher level of mutual recognition.

Our study also contributes to the body of knowledge on suggestive selling. More specifically, if one views the intention variable in our study as an indicator of customer behavior, our results contradict the findings of several previous studies, which indicate that suggestive selling improves sales (within the frame of one particular encounter; i.e. it has a positive impact on short-term customer behavior) relative to a context without suggestive selling (Ebster *et al.*, 2006; Milligan and Hantula, 2005; Martinko *et al.*, 1989; Ralis and O'Brien, 1986). Given that suggestive selling is highly cost efficient, such studies imply that this activity should be encouraged. However, such studies have been carried out in a "context-free" way in the sense that no information is provided about what the CCP is doing during the service encounter besides engaging or not engaging in suggestive selling. Moreover, explicit attempts to explain why the customer accepts or does not accept the suggestive selling attempts have been scarce and largely unsuccessful (see Borchgrevink and Susskind, 2006). We believe that these factors impose serious limitations on the implications of previous results, particularly as the context of positive CCP social behaviors is becoming institutionalized in many service

firms. It should be noted, however, that our results do not rule out the possibility that suggestive selling may increase sales in a situation in which the level of positive social behaviors exhibited by CCP is low (e.g. a very brief service encounter).

In addition, if we view our intentions variable as an indicator of purchase behavior within one particular service encounter and the attitude variable as a predictor of future purchase behaviors (e.g. in terms of repatronage behavior), the differences between the two in our study seem to suggest that the presence or absence of suggestive selling have different implications for short-term and long-term customer behavior. In other words, when a CCP engages in positive social behaviors, a suggestive selling attempt may reduce immediate sales, while the absence of suggestive selling may encourage the customer to come back and may have a positive impact on sales in the long term. A similar tradeoff is acknowledged in the literature on personal selling examining various sales techniques (see Hawes *et al.*, 1996). The results of the present study suggest that this tradeoff needs to be explicitly acknowledged. Furthermore, recent research suggests that successful suggestive selling is likely to have a less positive impact on profitability over time than previously believed (Shah *et al.*, 2012).

Managerial implications

Managerial control of CCP activities in service encounters is a challenge because service encounters usually take place when supervisors are not present. Many firms attempt to deal with this by introducing scripts (Tansik and Smith, 1991) or specifications (Pinto and Johnston, 2004) for CCPs. In the light of the increasing number of firms requiring CCPs to actively engage in sales efforts (and, in particular, in suggestive selling) and in positive social behaviors, our study has implications for control activities in which suggestive selling is a part of the CCP script. More specifically, our results suggest that congruent and incongruent suggestive selling should be avoided if the objective is to increase sales within the frame of one particular service encounter. If the objective is to increase future sales to the same customer, the results suggest that incongruent suggestive selling – but not congruent suggestive selling – should be avoided.

Many firms claim that future sales are relatively more important than current sales. Given that the former are the objective, our results call for managerial attention to the congruency issue. Organizations must consider when one particular offering is incongruent with another. In this regard, the service innovation literature is clear about one particular aspect of successful innovations – it strongly recommends that organizations collaborate with their CCPs (Gebauer *et al.*, 2008; Ordanini and Parasuraman, 2011). As CCPs are close to the customers, their knowledge of customers' needs should be considered when suggestive sales approaches (and other sales activities) are considered in service encounters, especially when the dual responsibilities of providing service and engaging in sales creates tension for CCPs. More specifically, a participative work environment that encourages CCPs to present their ideas and that genuinely treats CCPs as operant resources seems imperative (Ordanini and Parasuraman, 2011).

As suggestive selling take place near the end of a service encounter (after a customer has decided to buy one or more products), our results also call for management to focus on script content dealing with the ending of CCP-customer interactions. Previous research has found that the end of an experience can have an enormous impact on perceptions. Therefore, a service encounter should optimally finish on a positive note (Cook *et al.*, 2002). Managers must therefore carefully consider whether a selling attempt should be the final activity in a customer's interaction with the CCP.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

Our decision to examine suggestive selling in a context characterized by a high level of positive social behaviors from the CCP was motivated by the emphasis many firms place on such behaviors. However, there are many service encounters – especially brief encounters – in which these behaviors are not salient. One limitation of the present study is therefore that it did not examine low levels of positive social behaviors. Thus, a design allowing for high and low levels of such behaviors would be useful.

Moreover, we included only two types of suggestive selling, which differed in terms of the level of congruence between the initially purchased product and the suggested additional product. However, “congruence” is a somewhat nebulous construct (see Park *et al.*, 1991) and it comprises more than product feature similarity (which is the basic notion of congruence in the present study). One particularly relevant aspect may be the extent to which the product subject to a suggestive selling attempt is a complement to what the customer has already decided to buy. According to Guiltinan (1987), such complementarities could arise from: search economies (purchasing the products together reduces the amount of time and effort the customer must expend), customer satisfaction (one product enhances the customer’s satisfaction with another product), and total image aspects (purchasing the products together enhances the overall image of the firm). Future research that explicitly acknowledges the ways in which products can be related may be beneficial because different types of complementarities are likely to moderate responses to suggestive selling in different ways.

There is also a need to explore the impact of other types of suggestive selling, because suggestive selling can be more subtle than an explicit question from the CCP (as in the present study). For example, a folded linen napkin attractively placed in a pre-set wine glass on a restaurant table can make the glass easier to notice, thus “suggesting” that wine should be consumed (Krutson, 1988). Another example is found in fixed restaurant menus with food and drink pairings (Borchgrevink and Susskind, 2006). Suggestive selling can also be practiced in conjunction with customer relationship management, such as when Tesco (a retail grocery chain) uses loyalty card data to identify male shoppers who buy diapers for the first time and sends them coupons for beer because Tesco believes that new fathers are likely to buy more beer in supermarkets when they cannot spend as much time at restaurants or bars (Rust *et al.*, 2010). However, the effectiveness of such forms of suggestive selling has yet to be examined.

An additional important task for future research is to examine, in detail, why a certain selling activity is likely to have an impact. In the present study, we relied on a categorization-based explanation. However, other explanations are possible. For example, congruent suggestive selling may capitalize on a need for consistency (see Cialdini, 1988) more than incongruent suggestive selling. In other words, purchasing an additional item that is congruent with the first item may trigger a perception of one’s behavior as consistent, which may in itself be valued. This may affect evaluations in a valence-congruent manner.

Furthermore, we did not study actual behavior. As in many other studies of service encounters, we viewed intentions as a proxy for behavior. This is in contrast to several studies of suggestive selling in which customers’ real purchasing behaviors are studied. In this regard, researchers may benefit from collecting data on both behavioral and psychological responses from the same customers (e.g. in a field experiment). Such research should include intentions to return to the same firm, which would inform a more detailed discussion of the potential tradeoff between the short-term and long-term effects of various selling activities in a service encounter.

Finally, our motivation for using a convenience sample rests on the same arguments as in Calder *et al.* (1981), Petty and Cacioppo (1996), and Webster and Kerwin (1971). According to Chow (1995), the main issue in this respect is not whether the participants in a sample are different in general from those who were not selected, but whether the selected participants are likely to respond differently to the experimental treatment than those who were not selected. As all of our participants were engaged in business administration courses, it is possible that such differences existed in the sense that our participants may have had a more “pro-business mindset,” including a more positive view of sales attempts, than other participants. This may have caused the suggestive selling manipulations in our experiment to have weaker negative effects than they might have had for other participants.

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Further reading

Leidner, R. (1993), *Fast Food, Fast Talk*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Appendix. The scenario (without suggestive selling)

Imagine that you happen to read a newspaper article about a book that might be interesting. The book's title is *Rich Girls*. When you pass a bookstore, you stop to see whether it has this book in stock.

When you enter the store, a sales person notices you and greets you as she approaches. “Hi,” she says, “Can I help you?” You ask whether the store has *Rich Girls* in stock.

“Yes, we have it. Come with me!” says the sales person. She shows you to the part of the store where the book is. “Here it is [...] *Rich Girls*”, she says and hands the book to you.

“Hmm [...] I don’t think I am familiar with this author”, you say.

“Silke Scheuermann is her name. She is one of the younger German authors. She started out writing poems and this is an attempt to move beyond poetry. The book was first published in German some years ago. She has won several literary awards in Germany”, explains the sales person.

“So this is her first novel?” you ask.

“Well, it is not a novel. It is a collection of short stories”, says the sales person.

“I see”, you say. You ask the sales person if she has read the book.

“Yes, I have”, she says.

“So, what kind of stories are these? Is there any connection between them?” You ask.

“There is a common theme: love. Or, rather, I’d say: the destructive potential of love. The deception of falling in love, the degradation of desire, longing, and the depressive effects of marriage [...]”, says the sales person.

“These are not happy stories, then”, you say.

“They are somewhat dark. More pain than pleasure”, says the sales person.

“Well, there *can* be dark and painful aspects of relationships”, you say.

She looks at you for a moment and she says, “True. That’s life. Silke Scheuermann knows how to capture this. It seems as though you already knew something about the book when you came in.”

After you say that you read about it in a newspaper article, the sales person asks if the article was negative or positive. You discuss the article with the sales person for a while.

“The book is for you. It is not a gift, right?” Asks the sales person.

“It’s for me”, you say.

“Do you prefer short stories that are connected in some way?” She asks.

“Yes, I think so”, you say.

“Well, don’t worry. There is a common theme in Scheuermann’s stories”, says the sales person.

“OK, fine, I’d like to buy this book”, you say.

“Very well, thanks”, says the sales person. You follow her to the cash register in order to pay.

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