

**The shopper's first impression:
Immediate visibility of the store employee and its
impact on store evaluations**

Abstract prepared for the 4th NRWC 2014

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Several authors have assumed that first impressions are likely to have an impact on overall evaluations – even if additional clues are provided after the first impression. The purpose of this study is to examine this assumption in a retail context of brick and mortar stores and with respect to the visibility of the employee when the shopper is in the process of entering a store. The specific question addressed is this: does the immediate visibility of an employee have an impact on shoppers' overall store evaluations?

This study, then, deals with the potential impact of one particular appraisal (if store employees are visible or not) occurring in a very early step of a process in which subsequent information is provided and in which the final result is an overall evaluation by the shopper. Many existing studies have already shown that copious employee-related factors (e.g., courtesy, empathy, and product knowledge) have an impact on the shopper's overall evaluation. Yet such research fails to acknowledge that a store visit is typically a process in which different employee behaviors and characteristics – and store characteristics – are revealed at different points in time from the shopper's point of view. Our examination of the employee visibility factor should therefore be seen as an attempt to offer arguments regarding the need to better capture the time aspect (i.e., *when* does something occur?) in research on

the links between various employee-related and store-related factors and shoppers' overall evaluations. Moreover, some existing studies have dealt with the impact of human presence on the shopper, yet they have done so in terms of other customers. Such research shows that shoppers are indeed socially sensitive, both in terms of (a) presence versus absence of others and (b) the number of others. We believe, however, that the store employee is likely to play a more salient role than other customers in affecting shoppers' overall evaluations and thus that it is high time to examine also employee presence.

Conceptually, we argue that humans are hardwired to be perceptive in relation to other humans and that the presence of others is an automatic appraisal. We therefore assume that the shopper who is about to enter a store will make an appraisal if employees are present or not and use this information as inputs to approach and avoidance decisions as well as a basis for forming overall evaluations of the store. We also assume that (a) seeing an employee at an early point during a store visit is likely to be more positively charged than not seeing an employee and, given the general importance of first impressions, that (b) immediately seeing an employee would have a valence-congruent impact on subsequent overall evaluations of the store visit. Our main hypothesis, then, is as follows: when the shopper is entering a store, a visible store employee generates a more positive overall evaluation of the store visit than an invisible store employee.

We decided to use naturally occurring variation in store employee visibility in retailing as a point of departure for the empirical tests. That is to say, sometimes store employees are visible – and sometimes they are not visible – when shoppers enter stores. Two separate studies, both involving mystery shoppers, were carried out to test the hypothesis.

In Study 1 mystery shoppers ($n = 600$) who visited retail outlets comprising 15 categories (e.g., clothing, books, furniture, shoes, and sport goods) were instructed to (a) observe a set of factors related to store employees, and (b) assess the store visit in terms of customer satisfaction. One of the observation items was where the employees were located when the shopper entered the store, and the specific question to be answered was as follows: “Where were the sales persons when you entered the store?” Four response alternatives were provided (1) “behind the cash desk with customers”, (2) “behind the cash desk without customers”, (3) “on the floor of the store”, and (4) “I did not see any when I entered the store” (only one of these alternatives were allowed). We used customer satisfaction as the main measure of the

overall store evaluation, and it was captured with a single-item scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). We ran a one-way ANOVA with employee visibility as the factor (thus a variable which could take on one of four levels) and with customer satisfaction as the dependent variable. As for the specific test of the hypothesis, we assessed the satisfaction levels between the “no-employee-visible” group versus each of the three “visible-employee” groups (the Scheffé post hoc test was used). The result was that the satisfaction mean for the “no-employee-visible” group was significantly lower than the satisfaction means for the three “visible-employee” groups.

Study 2 was made to see if the results from Study 1 would be replicated with another overall evaluation variable. Observations were again made by mystery shoppers ($n = 347$) visiting retail outlets in 13 categories (e.g., pharmacies, clothing, furniture, and department stores), and their instructions were the same as in Study 1. In this study, however, the overall evaluation was captured with an item framed in terms of “your overall impression of the store” on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. The group comparison produced the same results as in Study 1.

The hypothesis was thus supported in both studies; if a store employee is visible immediately when the shopper is entering a store, it produces a higher levels of overall evaluations compared with when the store employee is invisible. This thus implies that retailers interested in boosting customer satisfaction and other overall evaluations need to pay attention to work routines and store design factors to make sure that employees are indeed visible at an early point in the shopper’s store visit.