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I'm Sorry for not Being Sorry: An Argument for Withholding an Apology After Service Failures

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INTRODUCTION

Proactive service recovery is thought to be a hallmark of world-class customer service. Many companies have adopted the practice of reaching out to consumers to apologize for suboptimal outcomes even before they complain (Kelley et al. 1993). For instance, Southwest Airlines has created a Proactive Customer Service Team dedicated to informing customers about issues before they are even noticed (Taylor 2008). Many companies are increasingly investing in technologies that will enable them to anticipate even small deviations in service quality and proactively reach out to consumers in real time. For example, Amazon Fresh's grocery delivery service is able to push notifications to consumers' phones to inform them of, and apologize for, delivery delays of only a few minutes.

But are these advancements in proactive service recovery actually improving consumers' evaluations of the service experience and the service provider or making them more likely to recommend the firm to others or engage with the firm again in the future? Research on service recovery has mostly relied on explicitly informing participants that a failure has occurred and testing the impact of an apology (Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2018). Thus, participants lacked the opportunity to decide for themselves whether an experience was a failure or not. Little is known about the effects of firms carrying out recovery efforts when consumers may or may not have already recognized and encoded an experience as a problem.

Recent research suggests that proactive service recovery may not always lead to positive customer reactions. For instance, Min et al. (2020) found that proactive apologies had negative effects relative to reactive apologies in situations where there was less of an expectation of future

interaction with an employee. Such proactive actions have been shown in prior work to lead the customer to view the recovery effort as more intentional and manipulative (Skarlicki et al. 2004). A proactive (vs. reactive) apology has also been shown to be interpreted as a sign the firm is not interested in knowing the customer's concerns or complaints (Boschoff and Leong 1998).

We propose that, not only will proactive apologies sometimes backfire relative to reactive apologies, they will backfire relative to no apology at all. This is because, by declaring that they failed to provide an adequate level of service, service providers may increase the likelihood that consumers will encode a service experience as a failure. In what follows, we present a large-scale field experiment that demonstrates that firm-issued proactive apologies for service failures have a negative impact on consumer satisfaction with the service experience, trust in the service provider, recommendation intentions, and repatronage intentions and behaviors.

Service Failure and Recovery

Service failures are a detrimental part of any consumer experience and their occurrence can lead to unfavorable consequences for the firm. Effective service recovery strategies are critical for restoring consumers' impressions, repairing consumer-firm relationships, avoiding negative word of mouth, and increasing the likelihood the consumer will return in the future (De Matos et al. 2007; Hogreve et al. 2019).

One feature common to many prior empirical studies is that they *begin* with the premise that the consumer has already diagnosed an experience as an unambiguous service failure. Participants in these studies were directly made aware that a failure occurred and were not given the opportunity to form their own assessments. Thus, a limitation of the existing empirical work

is that it has not considered the implications of issuing an apology for an experience that a consumer *has not already encoded as a failure.*

Similarly, prior conceptual work on service failure and recovery has also largely started with the premise that service failures and their underlying causes are clear to the consumer (Bitner et al. 1990). A recent review of the consumer's service recovery journey identified the first phase of this journey to be the pre-recovery phase. This is the time span between when a consumer realizes a service failure occurs and when the firm's recovery efforts begin (Van Vaerenbergh et al. 2018). Thus, a limitation of the conceptual work in this realm is they do not consider the situations in which a failure occurs of which consumers may be unaware.

In many situations, the occurrence of a service failure may not be obvious to consumers. As companies become increasingly interested in using technology to identify smaller and smaller deviations from best service, many failures may not be noticed by the consumer without these interventions calling attention to them. While technology may clearly flag the deviation as a failure from ideal delivery, the consumer may or may not interpret it as a failure. We argue that such pre-recovery perceptions are a key determinant of how consumers respond to proactive apologies for service failures and that consumers may be more likely to respond negatively to proactive apologies for experiences they have not already encoded as failures.

Ambiguous Service Failures and Consumer Memory

Proactive apologies are likely to affect whether consumers encode a service experience as a success or a failure. Consumer memory is highly malleable and past research has repeatedly demonstrated that situational cues can influence how consumers construct and reconstruct their memories (Loftus and Palmer 1974). For instance, firm-issued communications, such as advertising, can influence consumers' memory of their experiences and influence both judgments

(Cowley and Janus 2004) and behaviors (Braun 1999). We contend that firm-issued apologies may also affect consumers' memory of their service experiences and their subsequent responses.

Apologies communicate that the party delivering the apology has failed or wronged those receiving the apology (Hill 2013). Thus, apologies may make consumers aware of a failure that they might not otherwise have noticed. Apologies also provide information about what went wrong, which may serve to make negative aspects of the service encounter more salient as consumers think back over what events could be considered a failure. Additionally, apologies highlight the ways in which an experience deviated from ideal standard. This may make consumers more likely to interpret an otherwise ambiguous experience as inadequate. Together, by informing consumers that an experience was a failure, emphasizing the negative aspects of the experience, and pointing out how the experience was sub-standard, proactive apologies may make consumers more likely to encode a service experience as a failure.

We draw support from past research on the impact of firm-issued information on consumers' judgments and behaviors. Firm-issued information can lead consumers to become more aware of certain aspects of the service encounter. Consumers who knew prior to a service encounter that they would be giving feedback were more likely to focus on the negative aspects of the encounter when evaluating their experience (Ofir and Simonson 2001). In other words, being prompted to give feedback created a heighted awareness of the negative aspects of the service encounter. Research on question-behavior effects, or "mere measurement effects," demonstrates that the simple act of asking consumers a question influences what information becomes salient and accessible, and that this in turn has an impact on consumers' subsequent attitudes and beliefs (Moore et al. 2012; Fitzsimons and Morwitz 1996). Finally, the nature of post-purchase surveys can impact consumers' reinterpretation of the service encounter. For

instance, Bone et al. (2017) found that when positive aspects of a recent service encounter were made salient by the framing of post-purchase feedback, the consumers reported a more positive experience and increased future spending compared to consumers who did not have positive service elements made salient by a post-purchase survey. This body of research demonstrates that firm initiatives, both during and after the focal experience, can actively impact the encoding of the memory.

We contend that consumers who receive apologies for service failures will take the knowledge that the company failed to meet their service standards and use that information to evaluate the service experience and the service provider and decide whether to recommend the firm to others or engage with the firm again in the future. Specifically, we argue that it will decrease satisfaction, trust, recommendation intentions, and future repatronage behaviors. Consumer satisfaction is one of the most consistent outcomes affected by service failures (De Matos et al. 2007). An apology for a service failure may therefore reduce consumer satisfaction by making the consumer more likely to encode an otherwise ambiguous service experience as a failure. Service failures can also erode trust when not properly addressed (Hogreve et al. 2019). An apology for a service failure may backfire by leading consumers to perceive the firm as untrustworthy for not being able to deliver on the service experience. Past research has also found that service failures can also lead to a decrease in positive word of mouth (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002). Thus, an apology for a service failure may decrease consumers' likelihood of recommending the firm. Finally, after experiencing a service failure, a consumer may simply opt out of the relationship and avoid future patronage of the service provider (Grégoire et al. 2009).

Once the apology makes the consumer aware of a failure, they will likely decrease their future repatronage intentions and behavior.

The present research tests whether proactive apologies backfire by making consumers more likely to encode a service experience as a failure. This work makes an important contribution to knowledge on service recovery by challenging conventional wisdom and demonstrating an important boundary condition to the efficacy of proactive apologies as a service recovery strategy: namely, that apologies can backfire relative to no apology when consumers have not already encoded a service experience as a failure. Our findings answer a call by Voorhees et al. (2017) to extend knowledge beyond the core service recovery experience by showing that consumers' pre-recovery beliefs about whether or not an experience was a failure play an important role in shaping their post-recovery responses.

EVIDENCE

Our field experiment examined how proactive apologies for service failures impact repatronage behavior and post-purchase evaluations. We partnered with a real food delivery service similar to DoorDash, Uber Eats, or Seamless and varied whether or not the partner firm issued customers a proactive apology in the event of a service failure—in this case, a food delivery that arrived up to 15 minutes late. We predicted that apologies for ambiguous service failures would have detrimental effects on repatronage behavior and post-purchase evaluations.

Method

Participants. Our partner firm requested to run each experimental condition for a minimum of three weeks so that customer service staff could be comfortable administering the protocol for each condition. Secondary data from our partner firm suggested that about 2,500

orders arrive late during a three-week span. Thus, we implemented a rule that each experimental condition would be administered by the firm for a minimum of three weeks. If 2,500 participants had not been collected during this three-week period, then the experimental condition would continue for one additional week. A power calculation based on a hypothesized 5% difference in the repurchase rate across conditions yielded a needed minimum sample of 1,377 per condition to yield a power of 0.80, suggesting that our proposed sample should be adequate for our primary comparison of interest after applying a set of exclusion criteria described below.

Using this rule, over 4,000 late customer orders meeting our inclusion criteria described below were recorded over the course of eight weeks (2,156 customers over the course of four weeks in the no apology condition and 1,917 customers over the course of four weeks in the apology condition). We excluded any customers who were recorded as having called in to the customer service staff to inquire about the status of their order (as the apology would not then be proactive) and any customer who was recorded as having an additional issue with their order (items were left out of their order, food made incorrectly, driver got lost and called customer for directions), thus avoiding double deviations in our data. This data cleaning protocol left us with a final total of 3,083 unique customers receiving a late order (1,677 in the no apology condition and 1,406 in the apology condition).

Procedure. We partnered with a restaurant delivery service similar to DoorDash, Uber Eats, or Seamless. Restaurant delivery services offer the ability to order food for home delivery from restaurants who do not otherwise employ their own delivery staff. When placing an order online, the customer sees an estimated delivery time (typically in the range of 45 to 60 minutes).

Our operationalization of a service failure was receiving a late order that was expected to arrive up to 15 minutes after the quoted time range.

Based on our recommendations, our partner firm developed custom programing in their ordering system and re-trained customer service staff to deploy this field experiment. Prior to the experiment, the firm's standard practice was for customer service staff to use their own best judgment to anticipate when an order was likely to be late and proactively apologize for all anticipated late orders. Using the firm's historical data, we worked with the firm to create an algorithm that predicted whether an order was going to be late (based on information about each customer's order, such as when the restaurant received the ticket and when the delivery driver arrived at the restaurant) and notified service staff. Thus, we were able to standardize if and when an apology would be issued.

In the no apology condition, the customer service staff did not proactively call to notify and apologize to the customer for the anticipated late orders of 15 minutes or less. In the apology condition, the customer service staff called the customer when their order was anticipated to arrive late by the newly designed automated system, informed them of the issue, and apologized. At the management's request, all orders that were anticipated to be more than 15 minutes late received a proactive apology and were not included in our study.

Our primary behavioral outcomes included whether or not the customer returned (placed another order within 90 days of the late delivery) and the delay (in number of days) between the late order and that customer's next order. We also report the total number of repeat orders placed by the customer and total customer spend within 90 days as exploratory outcomes. We chose a

90-day window, as the firm's historical data shows that 68% of customers reorder within 90 days, thus providing ample time to observe repatronage behaviors.

To explore perceptual outcomes, all customers in our sample were emailed a post-purchase survey from the firm asking them to rate their likelihood of recommending the service to others ("Based on this order, how likely are you to recommend [firm name] to a friend or colleague?," *1 = not at all likely*; *10 = extremely likely*), satisfaction with the experience ("I really liked this experience," *1 = completely disagree*; *10 = completely agree*), and trust in the firm ("Based on this experience, I would feel confident ordering from [partner firm] in the future," *1 = completely disagree*; *10 = completely agree*), in that order as per the firm's request.

Results

Repatronage behaviors. Apologies backfired on all of our behavioral outcomes. Customers who received an apology were less likely to return (place another order) within 90 days of the service failure than customers who did not receive an apology (apology = 74.8% vs. no apology = 78.8%; $\chi^2(1, N = 3,083) = 6.94$, $p = .008$, $\varphi = .05$). Among customers who placed at least one order in the 90-day period, those who received an apology placed fewer repeat orders ($M_{apology} = 6.28$, $SD = 6.66$ vs. $M_{no\ apology} = 8.48$, $SD = 9.23$; $B = -2.20$, $SE = .35$, $t = -6.50$, $p < .001$), took a greater number of days to place their next order ($M_{apology} = 20.31$, $SD = 20.95$ vs. $M_{no\ apology} = 17.94$, $SD = 22.02$; $B = 2.37$, $SE = .89$, $t = 2.66$, $p = .008$), and spent less in the 90-day period ($M_{apology} = \$175.88$, $SD = \$208.76$ vs. $M_{no\ apology} = \$237.83$, $SD = 279.69$; $B = -61.95$, $SE = 10.36$, $t = -5.98$, $p < .001$) than those who did not receive an apology. Based on the 1,052

customers in the apology condition who did return, this represents an gap of $65,171 in lost revenue relative to the customers who were not issued an apology. See Table 1.

Post-purchase evaluations. A total of 249 customers in the no apology condition (11.5%) and 204 customers in the apology condition (14.5%) answered at least one question in the post-purchase survey. The following analyses reflect differing degrees of freedom due to incomplete responses. Customers who received an apology for a late food delivery were less satisfied with their experience than customers who did not receive an apology (M_{apology} = 7.37, SD = 3.08, vs. $M_{\text{no apology}}$ = 8.23, SD = 2.66; B = -.86, SE = .30, t = -2.91, p = .004), had less trust in the service provider (M_{apology} = 7.70, SD = 2.96 vs. $M_{\text{no apology}}$ = 8.50, SD = 2.51; B = -.81, SE = .28, t = -2.85, p = .005), and were less likely to recommend the service provider to a friend or colleague (M_{apology} = 7.76, SD = 2.96 vs. $M_{\text{no apology}}$ = 8.50, SD = 2.51; B = -.60, SE = .26, t = -2.31, p = .021). See Table 2.

CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Contrary to the predominant view in the service industry that proactively apologizing is the best policy for addressing service failures, evidence from our field experiment shows that proactive apologies can lower satisfaction with the service experience, trust in the service provider, recommendation intentions, and repatronage behaviors. This is consistent with the notion that consumers who receive an apology are more likely to encode a service experience as a failure than those who do not receive an apology. This can have significant long-term consequences for firms: in our field experiment, consumers who received an apology for an ambiguously late food delivery were less likely to place another order within the next 90 days,

placed fewer additional orders over the next 90 days, took longer to place their next order, and spent less overall over the next 90 days than consumers who did not receive an apology.

Our results highlight the need for managers to think carefully about when to implement a proactive service recovery initiative. Managers and firms may benefit from developing ways to indirectly gain insights into consumers' pre-recovery appraisals of their service experiences and leverage these insights to decide whether or not to engage in proactive service recovery. First, managers can identify situations in which consumers are likely to have more or less clear expectations for service quality. For example, consumers may have less clear expectations for restaurants that are newly opened, services that are newly available, or software that is newly developed and may therefore respond less favorably to proactive apologies for deficiencies in these services than in those that are more established and familiar. Second, managers can use services blueprinting techniques in order to understand where along the consumer journey ambiguity lies. Services blueprinting involves mapping the relationships between consumer's thoughts and behavior and their touchpoints with the firm (Shostack 1984), and can be used to pinpoint where failures are likely to occur and how they are likely to be perceived by consumers. Finally, managers and their frontline employees can hone expertise in "reading" consumers and intuitively getting a sense of their issues, much in the same way that sales staff must understand whether consumers are in need of being approached for help.

Another challenge that managers must consider is how to better direct frontline employees' recovery efforts. Our studies show that deploying frontline workers to apologize for marginal or otherwise ambiguous service failures may actually have negative repercussions for post-purchase evaluations of the firm as well as subsequent repatronage behaviors. Deploying frontline employees to apologize only for major service failures can make it less likely that their

efforts will be counterproductive. It can also free those frontline employees to focus their efforts where they are more likely to add value for consumers. Employees could give additional attention to disgruntled customers who experienced more egregious mistakes. They could also re-channel their efforts into solving the back-end issues that contribute to service failures. For example, rather than call consumers to apologize for small delivery delays, frontline employees could call drivers or suppliers to identify the source of the delay and troubleshoot solutions. This strategic reallocation of effort can help to ensure that a firm's recovery tactics are appropriately tailored and pave the way for smoother and more satisfying interactions in the future.

An interesting direction for future research would be to explore whether the negative effects of apologies might be mitigated or even reversed by supplementing them with other recovery strategies. In our field experiment, at our partner company's request, we explored whether augmenting a proactive apology with monetary compensation (a $5 discount on the customer's order) might yield more positive responses. We tested this claim with an additional smaller sample of 373 customers who received a 1-15 minute late order and who received an apology and a $5 discount on the current order. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, responses in the proactive apology with monetary compensation condition were in between those in the apology and no apology conditions and did not reliably differ from either condition, suggesting that augmenting apologies with monetary compensation may be an expensive strategy that is unlikely to pay off. However, resource exchange theory proposes that service recovery efforts are more likely to be successful when the recovery offered (monetary compensation) matches the resource that was deprived during the failure (defective products; Roschk and Gelbrich 2014). In the case of a late delivery order, perhaps offering to expedite the customers' next order may do more to

restore the failure and encourage repatronage behavior than offering a monetary discount on the initial order.

As more and more companies refine their proactive service recovery policies and become better at anticipating and apologizing for even small deviations in service quality, we caution that the speed with which companies adopt these new capabilities should not outpace their ability to know when and when *not* to wield them. We find that proactively apologizing for service failures can decrease consumer satisfaction, trust in the service provider and its employees, recommendation intentions, and repatronage behaviors, by making the consumer more likely to encode an experience as a failure. It is therefore critical that managers consider how likely consumers are to perceive a given experience as a service failure when choosing a service recovery strategy. Even though a firm may have the ability to flag and proactively apologize, apologizing may do more harm than good if consumers would not otherwise encode the experience as a failure. Moreover, managers should consider focusing frontline employees' efforts on selectively reaching out to consumers only for major service failures and, most of all, ensuring that consumers' next experience is an unambiguously positive one.

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Table 1

REPATRONAGE BEHAVIOR BY APOLOGY CONDITION

	Apology (n = 1,406)	No apology (n = 1,677)
	% | *M* (*SD*)	% | *M* (*SD*)
Return rate	74.8% [a]	78.8% [b]
Repeat orders	6.28 (6.66)[a]	8.48 (9.23)[b]
Reorder delay (days)	20.31 (20.95)[a]	17.94 (22.02)[b]
Total spend	$175.88 (208.76)[a]	$237.83 (279.69)[b]

Note: Row means that do not share a common superscript differ at the *p* < .01 level.

Table 2

POST-PURCHASE SURVEY RESPONSES BY APOLOGY CONDITION

	Apology (n = 204)	No apology (n = 249)
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
Satisfaction (1-10)	7.37 (3.08)[a]	8.32 (2.66)[b]
Trust (1-10)	7.70 (2.96)[a]	8.50 (2.51)[b]
Recommendation intentions (1-10)	7.76 (2.96)[a]	8.50 (2.51)[b]

Note: Row means that do not share a common superscript differ at the *p* < .05 level.

Table 3

REPATRONAGE BEHAVIOR BY APOLOGY AND MONETARY COMPENSATION

	Apology No compensation (n = 1,406)	No apology No compensation (n = 1,677)	Apology $5 compensation (n = 373)
	% | *M* (*SD*)	% | *M* (*SD*)	% | *M* (*SD*)
Return rate	74.8%[a]	78.8%[b]	76.0%[a b]
Repeat orders	6.31[a] (6.73)	8.48[b] (9.23)	6.45[a] (6.69)
Reorder delay (days)	20.35[a] (20.67)	17.94[b] (22.02)	20.00[ab] (19.37)
Total spend	$175.88[a] (208.19)	$237.83[b] (279.69)	$188.18[ab] (226.33)

Note: Row means that do not share common superscripts differ at the *p* < .05 level.

Table 4

POST-PURCHASE SURVEY RESPONSES BY APOLOGY AND MONETARY
COMPENSATION

	Apology No compensation (n = 204)	No apology No compensation (n = 249)	Apology $5 compensation (n = 55)
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
Satisfaction (1-10)	7.41[a] (3.08)	8.23[b] (2.66)	6.93[a] (3.19)
Trust (1-10)	7.73[a] (2.96)	8.50[b] (2.51)	7.41[ab] (3.12)
Recommendation intention (1-10)	7.78[ab] (2.98)	8.36[a] (2.51)	7.00[b] (3.37)

Note: Row means that do not share common superscripts differ at the *p* < .05 level.