

IDENTIFYING ELEMENTS OF
OFFSHORE SERVICE ETHNOCENTRISM

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Abstract: *Off-shoring operations is not new but modern technology (telephony and Internet) has profoundly changed the nature of offshoring allowing firms to access human factors, both basic and skilled labor, to provide services (medical, financial, tax, and customer relations) directly to consumers from abroad. This has permitted firms to realize savings due to differences in labor costs between countries involved in the exchange. Despite costs savings, consumers do not always openly accept being provided services from abroad and, in some cases, develop negative feelings towards both firms that outsource and offshore service agents. Based upon a review of the literature along with a number of exploratory interviews the service ethnocentrism and animosity construct is introduced and hypothesized to be composed of the following dimensions: resentment towards companies for offshoring positions, home country/ethnic bias, animosity towards offshore service agents, discomfort with accents, security/privacy concerns, and propensity to support laws against offshoring. In addition, strategies are identified that firms can employ to maintain positive relationships with customers while offshoring service operations.*

Key words: Services, Service Ethnocentrism, Outsourcing, Offshoring, International Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Offshoring, defined as the purchase of services from overseas providers at “arms-length” or the transfer of tasks within the firm overseas, is having a growing impact on economies, companies, workers, and customers (Kirkegaard, 2004). Although it has been argued that offshoring will provide positive results in the long run, displaced/threatened workers, unions, many politicians, and members of the media feel that companies that outsource are disloyal “unpatriotic Benedict Arnolds” that put their own profits above the domestic economy and workers. In one study, 71% of the respondents stated that they were aware of the practice of offshoring with 78% of that group having an unfavorable opinion of it (Anonymous, American Banker 5-OCT-04). The reaction of customers ranges from irritation at having to deal with someone with an accent, refusal of the customer to call a company when there are no *Americans* around with whom to speak, or refusing to do business with a company that offshores jobs. These were mentioned in fact-finding interviews conducted for this paper. The international services literature acknowledges a lack of theory that can explain and predict how consumers will react towards the continued and growing practice of offshoring.

There have been a series of reviews and perspectives of the international services literature (Javalgi and White 2002; Clark and Rajaratnam 1999; Knight 1999; Samiee 1999), plus articles examining the relationship between services and country of origin (Speece and Pinkaeo 2002; Bruning 1997; Kaynak, Kucukemiroglu, and Kara 1994), cross-national/cross-cultural comparisons of services (Leisen and Vance 2001, Liu, Furrer, and Sudharshan 2001; Smith and Reynolds 2001; Winsted 1999; Mattila 1999; Winsted 1997; Malhotra et al. 1994), and international service encounters (Barker and Hartel 2004; Warden et al. 2003; Weiermair 2000; Stauss and Mang 1999). A limited number of articles evaluate consumers’ likelihood to select

service representatives based upon their ethnicity (Harrison-Walker 1995) or address the impact of consumer ethnocentrism, using the CETSCALE, on attitudes towards using foreign services (de Ruyter, Birgelen, and Wetzels 1998).

This manuscript is designed to help researchers and companies understand how consumers feel about offshoring in general and direct contact with offshore service agents. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the international services knowledge base by identifying and understanding which variables lead to the negative feelings that consumers have regarding firms that outsource business processes and jobs and why consumers may feel discomfort or even reject dealing with offshore service agents. Equipped with a greater understanding of the causes of negative feelings held by consumers towards offshoring marketers are better enabled to manage the issue. In addition, the paper addresses techniques companies can use to minimize negative responses by customers to offshoring. See diagram one for conceptual framework.

//Take in Diagram 1 about here//.

INTERNATIONAL SERVICES LITERATURE

Several important themes are emphasized in the international services literature including the importance of international services, a lack of fruitful international services theories, the role of technology, and categorization of international services. International services, the fastest growing part of international trade, have been recognized as important to the economies of both developed and developing countries (Javalgi and White 2002) in addition to being an important field within the marketing discipline. Despite the recognition of international services to the world economy and to marketing, international services theories that “explain, predict, and provide practical guidance to firms” (Javalgi and White 2002, p. 578) for international services are underdeveloped while the extant research is fragmented, exploratory, and theoretically deficient (Knight 1999). This can be attributed to difficulties in defining international services

due to the complications of citizenship and residency of participants and location of transactions (Clark, Rajaratnam, and Smith 1996). However, the most appropriate definition for the purposes of this research is “deeds, performances, efforts conducted across national boundaries in critical contact with foreign cultures” (Clark and Rajaratnam 1999, p.15).

International services, although not a new area of business, have recently seen dramatic growth which can be attributed to the use of information technology, i.e., digitalized transmissions or telephony (Kirkegarrrd 2004), which are changing methods of data collection and presentation, delivery of services, and interaction between service providers and recipients (Javalgi and White 2002). For example, in the past, the transmission of radiological scans resulted in blurry images, but as technology has advanced the transmission of clear scans is now possible thus allowing offshore radiologists to examine x-rays (Palvia 2004). The increased sophistication of technology has hastened the calls for research addressing the “importing” of customers, and thus “exporting” of service agents, via telecommunications and the Internet to take advantage of services that can be offered via such systems (Knight 1999).

The growth and multifaceted nature of international services has allowed for the categorization of different types of international services. Patterson and Cicic (1995) provided a 2X2 framework of international services with high/low face-to-face and high/low tangibility dimensions. It was recognized that services may be location free (low face-to-face and low tangibility), location bound (high face-to-face and low tangibility), standardized (low face-to-face and high tangibility) or value-added customized services (high face-to-face and high tangibility). Technology appears to minimize the high/low face-to-face split for some services. Clark, Rajaratnam, and Smith (1996) recognized this when developing their typology of international services. They identify four types of international services: contact-based (people

cross a border), vehicle-based (electro-magnetic signals), asset-based (capital), and object-based (objects). However, they acknowledge that when the service provider and recipient interact directly via voice or image, vehicle-based services become as sensitive to cultural influences as contact based services. Physical distances no longer inhibit cultural exchanges from occurring.

Malhotra et al. (1994) hypothesized that there are significant differences regarding the determinants or dimensions of service quality. Although their research addressed differences between developed and developing countries various studies have found differences between countries of similar economic status but culturally different. In an effort to identify behaviors for assessing service encounter quality across cultures, Winsted (1997) found different constructs to vary in importance by country, i.e., friendliness, being personal, authenticity, and promptness are important in the US, while care for the customer is important in Japan. In addition, when a dimension appears in both countries the specific behaviors composing that dimension may change across groups. In a follow-up study, Winsted (1999) found that “what matters most to a consumer when evaluating a service encounter differs according to both culture and industry” (p. 119). Leisen and Vance (2001) determined that a five-dimension service quality construct exists for the telecommunications industry across German and US samples but the dimensions change in importance among countries. Therefore, what a consumer wants in a service encounter is culture and industry bound.

Research has also assessed the impact of cultural dimensions on expectations and evaluation of service quality. Liu, Furrer, and Sudharshan (2001) found in a study of how “culture impacts behavioral intentions towards services” (p. 1) that customers from lower individualism or higher uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to praise good service, tend not to switch, and tend not to complain or give negative word of mouth for poor service. Customers

from higher individualism or lower uncertainty avoidance cultures switch, complain, or give negative word of mouth for poor service but do not praise superior service. Donthu and Yoo (1998), analyzing groups based on cultural dimensions, found that more individualistic consumers exhibited high expectations for empathy and assurance while those placing low on power distance expected responsive and reliable service. Cultural values impact consumers' appraisal of services.

Barker and Hartel (2004) posit that the study of differences in service provider and recipient culture has received limited attention in the research of cross-cultural/cross-national services. Utilizing a series of interviews of immigrant and minority customers' interactions with service providers of European descent in Australia, they found customers perceived service providers as putting forth little effort to ensure that the immigrant or minority customer was satisfied. Stauss and Mang (1999) surveyed American, German, and Japanese male patrons of a German airline assessing their cross-cultural service interactions. They found that negative cultural encounters were more likely between culturally closer participants. When the service encounter was between more culturally diverse participants the perceived severity of a negative encounter was diminished due to customer attributing the issue to their cultural difference and the ability of the "foreign" provider to control the situation. This diminished as the customer became more familiar with the service provider's culture. Warden et al. (2003) extended this research by adding a service recovery component. Collecting critical incidence data from Taiwanese respondents via an Internet survey they determined that positive recovery attempt by domestic service providers will increase the level of perceived service but the same result for intercultural encounters is given more weight due to the assumed differences in culture.

Differences between customer and service representative's ethnicity or nationality affect service performance perception.

Tourism has also been an area of research for cross-cultural service encounters. Weiermair (2000) proposes that cultural proximity/distance impacts tourists' expectations and attitudes towards service quality and concludes that international tourism calls for providers to take into account global, national, and local cultures. In addition, the service recipients' purpose in consuming the service is crucial in evaluating its quality (Mattila 1999). In a study of Asian and Western business and leisure travelers it was determined that there was no difference in business travelers' ratings based upon race but there was a significant difference between leisure travelers' ratings based upon race with Asians rating services lower. This indicates that services expectations change not only by industry but according to the purpose of the user.

These cited studies allow us to conclude that service expectations vary significantly across cultures and industries and that cross-cultural/cross-national service encounters taking place in the service recipient's home/adopted country or in a familiar culture may be perceived as less positive than when the customer is in an unfamiliar culture. Research regarding country-of-origin/ethnocentrism of consumers, considered as one of the elements of service ethnocentrism, will be reviewed along with the other dimensions of service ethnocentrism.

SERVICE ETHNOCENTRISM

Booms and Bitner (1981), recognizing that services are characterized by intangibility, perishability, inseparability and heterogeneity, felt that the 4 Ps needed to be expanded for services adding three elements to the mix: participants, physical evidence, and process. The intangibility of services can make it difficult for consumers to evaluate the quality of services, be they pure or accompanying physical goods, even after the consumers have received the service (Mitchell and Greatedorex 1993; Zeithaml 1981). The purchase of services is considered riskier

than the purchase of goods because services tend to have either experience qualities or credence qualities while goods tend to be high in search qualities (Ostom and Iacobucci 1995). Therefore, consumers may judge the quality of the service based on how they judge the service providers (Kotler 2000). In the case of an international encounter, the service process is complicated by the cultural and physical distance between the client and the service provider; and the greater the cultural distance, the wider the gap in service expectations (Warden et al. 2003).

De Ruyter, van Birgelen, and Wetzels (1998), in a replication of Sharma, Shimp and Shin's (1995) study of antecedent and demographic determinants of consumer ethnocentrism, modified the original CETSCALE substituting "services" for "products". Their research places the responsibility of purchasing a service from an offshore service provider on consumers and fellow citizens; much like the CETSCALE does with products. This research differs in that it posits service ethnocentrism as the negative or resentful feeling that domestic customers experience towards the domestic company responsible for offshoring domestic jobs and overseas service providers when being provided a service from an offshore location.

Service ethnocentrism can be a deeper and more emotional issue than consumer ethnocentrism because the customer may not be presented with a choice when being provided a service from an offshore provider; whereas, when buying a physical product the consumer often has an opportunity to choose between domestic and foreign goods. Based upon a review of the literature along with a limited number of exploratory interviews with individuals who have interacted with foreign agents the service ethnocentrism construct is hypothesized to be composed of the following dimensions: resentment towards companies for offshoring positions, home country/ethnic bias, animosity towards service providers, discomfort with accents, security/privacy concerns, and propensity to support laws against offshoring.

Resentment towards companies for offshoring positions. The negative feeling towards offshoring and companies that offshore is so hot that it has even coined a new moniker: “The Dobbs Effect” (Cocheo A -2004). The cry of “Hire American,” second cousin to “Buy American,” (Cocheo - B, 2004) and the fears of being “outed” appears to be having an impact on American firms. The jobless numbers make offshoring a sensitive issue and American CEOs are now being berated for transferring jobs abroad. Some firms have paid heed canceling offshore contracts fearing the loss of customer goodwill, e.g., Capital One Financial Group (Edwards, 2004). In the 2004 US Presidential election, companies that took advantage of offshoring were labeled “unpatriotic” or “Benedict Arnold” companies. Firms that continue to offshore jobs and business processes will be subjected to resentment by customers for being disloyal to the American economy and workers. Therefore, the following proposition is offered:

P1: Consumers will exhibit negative feelings towards companies that offshore.

Home country/ethnic bias. Studies addressing services and country-of-origin have included the home country as one of the alternatives, which generates a certain amount of home country bias in the research. In a review of the literature to determine if country-of-origin applies to services Javalgi, Cutler, and Winans (2001) conclude that “consumers prefer core services from their own country, from more economically developed countries and from countries with a similar culture” (p. 581) indicating that customers form biases. For example, studies of consumer preferences of airlines (Bruning 1997; Kaynak, Kucukemiroglu, and Kara 1994) find that overall consumers prefer domestic airlines and this bias tends to be stronger among females, lower income, blue collar, and less frequent travelers. A study of Thai university students’ insurance provider preference and Thai high school students’ education provider preference indicates that there is a hierarchy related to country-of-brand, country-of-design, and price/quality perception but the

home country is rated higher than would be expected in comparison to other countries (Speece and Pinkaeo 2002).

Based upon the cited research customers will prefer to receive services from home-based service agents and service agents from economically developed countries as opposed to developing countries. In addition, the smaller the cultural distance between the customer and the agent the more comfortable the customer will feel with the service exchange. Based upon this information the following proposals are made:

P2: Consumers are more willing to accept services from domestic than foreign agents.

P3: Service agents from economically advanced countries are more acceptable to customers than those from developing countries.

P4: Customers' comfort level with offshore service agents is impacted by cultural distance.

Animosity towards service providers. The loss of well paying jobs in the US leads to a climate of fear and animosity. White collar workers, many of whom had assumed that education would assure their employment prospects, are now unhappy participants in the “race to the bottom” phenomenon that their blue collar brethren experienced years beforehand (Prahalad, Krishnan, and Donker 2004). American workers', especially those in white collar jobs, resentment towards workers in other countries may be attributed to a new global arbitrage brought about by technology that has negatively impacted job growth in high-wage economies (Roach 2004). Due to Americans feeling helpless and hostile about offshoring, the immigrant worker competing for a job in the US is not subject to the same animosity as a worker in Bangalore, India (Snyder 2004). This has developed to the point of Indian service agents receiving ethnically degrading and demeaning comments from overseas customers (Basu 2003). Therefore, it is expected that:

P5: Consumers will exhibit animosity towards offshore service agents.

Accent resentment. While it is posited by some that accent is not as serious as a problem as not being able to understand the other person (Punch 2004), studies have shown that Standard

English speakers are more effective and are assigned a higher status. Accented speech is correlated with lower status (Brennan and Brennan 1981), can cause irritation on the part of the receiver, can be mistaken for an inability to speak English (Barker & Hartel 2004), and may be a source of stereotypes (Brennan and Brennan 1981). The stronger someone's accent, the worse the problem (Brennan and Brennan 1981). In the US it has been found that geography and age affect tolerance for accents with residents of the coasts and younger people being more tolerant (Anonymous, Thunderbird 2004). Some companies, e.g., Lehman Brothers and Dell, experienced so many complaints about the accents of their offshore service agents that they relocated call centers back to the US (Basu 2003). Overall, it is expected that:

P6: Consumers will exhibit a negative attitude towards interacting with service agents who have accents.

Security/privacy concerns. Many developing countries do not have the same level of security or privacy standards as the US (Gupta and Seshasai 2004). This has already become an issue as breaches have occurred: a worker in Pakistan threatened to make public medical records from the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco if they did not help resolve disputed wages from a subcontractor, and a worker at a call center in Noida, India used American's credit card information to purchase electronics from Sony. This concern will increase as customers being served by offshore service providers become aware of the degree of offshoring taking place: 200,000 US tax returns were processed in India in 2004, 10% of all medical transcriptions are done abroad, and Trans Union has 100% of its mail concerning customer disputes offshored (Swartz 2004). Therefore, it is expected customers will express a significant amount of discomfort in having their personal and private information, medical records, credit card information, tax and financial records, sent abroad for storage, preparation, and analysis due to concerns over security and privacy. The following proposition is offered:

P7: Customers are concerned about the amount of security/privacy provided by offshore service providers.

Propensity to support laws against offshoring. Thirty-three states, thirty since January 2004, have introduced legislation that bans or restricts the use of foreign labor for state government contracts. There are at least 13 bills generated by Congress restricting the awarding of federal constructs to offshore contractors (Lieberman 2004). Support for legislative activities comes from organizations focusing on white collar tech workers, which have sprouted up blaming outsourcing for employment troubles (Drezner 2004). Therefore, it is expected that consumers will support laws that restrict the movement of personal data abroad as well as support laws preventing the offshore outsourcing of jobs. Ergo, we proffer the following propositions:

P8: There is a strong tendency among consumers to support laws against the transfer of private information abroad.

P9: Consumers will support legislation restricting offshoring of domestic jobs.

The previous section offers literature supporting various dimensions of the service ethnocentrism construct. Recognizing that consumers exhibit negative or resentful feelings about offshoring as well as identifying elements of service ethnocentrism, the next section provides techniques and strategies that firms can employ to address service ethnocentric customers.

SERVICE RECOVERY

Assessing the Likelihood of Customer Defection

From a managerial perspective, one tactic which can be employed in controlling for the effects of service ethnocentrism is to predict when a customer is likely to defect. Defection refers to a situation in which a customer leaves one firm in order to purchase from another (Hogan, Lemon, and Libai 2003). A study by BenchmarkPortal Inc. found that 65% of American consumers would change their buying behavior if they learned a company was using an offshore call center (McCafferty 2003). If the defection probability for a particular client is

high, the firm could consider handling the transactions for that particular client domestically. The key factor which could *push* a consumer away from a service provider is a low level of customer satisfaction (Capraro, Broniarczyk, and Srivastava 2003). It is a well-accepted maxim in the marketing literature that satisfaction and purchase intent move in tandem (Gilly and Gelb 1982; LaBarbera and Mazursky 1983). Consequently, the service provider would be well advised to monitor customer satisfaction levels.

Implementing Service Recovery Initiatives

In the mind of a service ethnocentric consumer, being provided off-shored service could constitute a service failure. By definition, service failures are any service related mishaps or problems [real or perceived] that transpire during a customer's experience with a firm (Maxham 2001). More specifically, failures encompass activities that transpire as a result of customer perceptions of initial service delivery falling below the customer's expectations (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1993). Hence, the off-shored service could fall short of fulfilling a customer's expectations and, therefore, require a failure recovery strategy on the part of the firm.

Complaint Solicitation. The first step in a failure recovery strategy is to solicit the complaint. The vast majority of disgruntled customers will defect rather than voice their complaint to the service provider (Hart, Heskett, and Sasser 1990). One direct way to solicit complaints is to ask straight-to-the-point questions like, "How is everything?" (Halstead, Droge, and Cooper 1993). Once the complaint has been voiced, the service firm should utilize the L.E.A.R.N. process [Listen, Empathize, Apologize, React, Notify] (Magnini and Ford 2004). In this process, the 'react' stage should entail switching the ethnocentric customer back to a domestic service provider. Further, the 'notify' step should encompass making a note in the customer database not to off-shore this client's service in the future. Managers should empower all frontline

employees with full authority to carry out the L.E.A.R.N recovery process because empowerment enhances the employee's ownership of the problem and facilitates the speed in which the problem is resolved (Magnini and Ford 2004). Offshore call center agents tend to overemphasize the scripted answers (Anonymous, Thunderbird 2004; Basu 2003). Since service recovery requires deviation from routine tasks (Magnini and Ford 2004) firms should consider directing those call to the domestic call centers.

Accent Neutralization. As previously discussed, differences in accents between the service agent and the customer can create a negative experience for both sides. However, it is the responsibility of the service provider to assure a positive experience for the customer. To assess the potential disconnect between their agents and customer firms may want to consider the use of the *Accentedness Index* (Brennan and Brennan 1981) which rates someone's speech on a scale from unaccented to all target pronunciations being accented. Recognizing that accented speech can create a negative impression with some customers some companies have begun to offer accent reduction and neutralization classes (Doehrman 2004; Krishnan 2004; Krebsbach 2004; McCafferty 2003) as well as ESL (English as a second language) classes (Dutton 1998). The classes aim to reduce or neutralize the accent thus making the speaker more understandable to the American ear with some sources (Read 2004) stating that the accent is not detectable as a result of the class.

Cross-cultural training. Marketing services internationally is difficult due the closeness between a society and services provided in that society (Dahringer 1991); and the greater the cultural differences or distance between the provider and the customer, the greater the "cognitive and communication gaps" (Clark and Rajaratnam 1999, p.302). The cross-cultural training helps to bridge these gaps. Cross-cultural classes are used to familiarize students with various aspects

of US culture, e.g., US holidays, typical activities of an American family (Punch 2004), most popular US TV shows, and even traits of New Yorkers vs. Texans (Basu 2003). One company goes as far as having its employees view slides of George Clooney in personal grooming classes (Basu 2003). Some companies require that employees pass the Americanization test (Punch 2004). An example of the results of such training is an agent chatting with a customer about the recent Braves game while waiting to receive additional information.

When conducting cross-cultural training it is important to remember that the training is necessary due to cultural differences between offshore agents and domestic customers. Consequently, training programs should be customized to the cultures involved rather than standardized. For example, communism in China has created a certain negative attitude towards “serving” people, which, coupled with the policies of no layoffs and group-based rewards, creates a service attitude very different from that found in US (Magnini and Ford 2004). Without considering differences among cultures training programs risk being ineffective.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research addresses a phenomenon that is growing in its impact on governments, firms, workers, and consumers. Governments, feeling the pressure from workers, are enacting legislation affecting the ability of firms to offshore business processes, and consumers are showing resentment to these firms for trying to offshore jobs. On the other hand, firms feel the pressure to stay competitive and serve customers 24/7 and offshoring offers them a way to achieve this goal but the risk of being “outed” by Lou Dobbs is always present. Offshoring, although not a new event, traditionally thought of as a problem for blue collar workers and smokestack industries now impacts well trained and educated white collar workers in high tech industries. This is an especially sensitive issue because the domestic workers whose job is

threatened by offshoring come into direct contact, through advancements in technology, with offshore service agents while sitting in their home.

The dimensions identified as comprising service ethnocentrism are issues that marketing managers need to be aware of and may wish to influence in the minds of consumers. As the negative connotation of offshoring continues to grow or as consumers become less tolerant in dealing with non-domestic service agents marketing managers will continue to look for ways to make their service and service agents less “foreign” in the minds of the customer. This research suggests methods that managers can use to overcome the negative feelings that consumers have about offshoring and dealing with offshore service agents, i.e., cross-cultural training, accent reduction, and complaint solicitation. These are not meant to deceive the customer, but only to have them feel more at ease with the exchange. The increased insight into how consumers feel about offshoring and the techniques for overcoming negative feelings allow managers to make decisions leading to greater profitability for the firm.

Although it does not intend to provide an overall theory of international services, this paper aids in the advancement of theory for this important field of marketing. This paper illustrates how advancements in technology bring together existing fields of research; ethnocentrism and internationalization of services, to create a distinctive field for continued research and theory development. This research demonstrates that services marketing and international marketing, previously thought of as distinct and separate fields, are overlapping and blending through the use of technology. This impacts not only theory development but also material presented to students in the classroom.

DIAGRAMS

Elements of Service Ethnocentrism

Resentment
towards
companies that
offshore

Home
country/ethnic
bias

Animosity
towards service
providers

Accent
resentment &
discomfort

Security &
privacy
concerns

Propensity to
support laws
against
offshoring

SERVICE
ETHNOCENTRISM

DETECT
CUSTOMER
DEFECTION
TENDENCY

Techniques for Preventing Customer Defection

IMPLEMENT
APPROPRIATE
SERVICE
RECOVERY
TECHNIQUE:
COMPLAINT
SOLICITATION,
ACCENT
NEUTRALIZATION,
CROSS-CULTURAL
TRAINING

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