

# Emotional Contagion – A Nemesis? Case Study Approach

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## Abstract

### Purpose:

This case study looks at how emotions can play a major role in influencing customers' response to the service provider.

### Design/ Methodology/ Approach:

A case study methodology has been utilized to highlight the significance of managing emotions in a service encounter. It portrays the effect of emotions on individuals both in a positive as well as in a negative light.

### Practical Implications:

Service providers find it challenging to ensure customer satisfaction. Since standardization is impossible in a service environment, it becomes imperative to sensitize one's employees towards managing one's response towards customers. Emotions when not controlled simply mimic that of the person with whom we are interacting – hence considered as contagious. The situations described in the case reveal how ordinary service encounters metamorphose into situations necessitating urgent action simply because emotionally charged individuals reacted to the situation ahead of them.

**Keywords:** Service Scape, Service Encounters, Emotions, Emotional Contagion

## Introduction

Ms Deekshita Ganguly is a faculty with a leading business school in Madurai. She was born and brought up in Chennai the erstwhile Madras, a city she liked to refer to often during her conversations. She did her undergraduate course in Psychology and her Masters in Business Administration, quite a rare combination according to a lot many people who come across her profile. She always

explained that it was an interest in people that led her to take up Psychology, however when it came to a choice between Clinical versus Business Psychology, she found that her interest in the psychology of people was more of a nature of working with them and enabling/ motivating them to perform well in an organizational setting. Hence the choice for a Masters Degree in Management. She had worked with seven firms in different industries over the last two decades before she decided to become a freelance consultant. Having taken up this new avatar, many of her earlier colleagues both her contemporaries as well as the people she had mentored appreciated the fact that she was not associated with any single firm, so her expertise could be sought by everyone. She was contemplating all this today while she was preparing her report on Star Continental Hotel, located in Nainital, a far flung place from her hometown and as different in climate and food preferences as can probably be possible only in a country as diverse as India. She had to present this report based on her findings to the CEO of Hotel Star Continental Ankur Aggarwal who had joined on board in January 2016 post his five years of tenure with another 7 star property in Mumbai.

Ankur, an alumnus of IHM Chennai joined the industry straight after his Bachelors and grew up the ladder beginning with Housekeeping. It was during one such tenure with Hotel Sinai in Madurai that he had the opportunity to work with Ms. Deekshita who was his boss as HR Head and he was a Training Manager. His last location was Mumbai. The decision to relocate was to take a break from city life and be in a natural setting which is the envy of many a soul. Having landed here, he had his usual rounds of meetings with people at various levels. He found the staff were extremely happy with the

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organization and the facilities provided both to the guests as well as the staff themselves. He found the practices within the organization very meticulous. Documentation of every aspect of the business was one key aspect that was followed religiously in this organization. Every department seemed to have trained their staff on the procedures and processes quite well – this was the account given by the staff, their supervisors as well as the records maintained. However, the customer feedbacks and reviews – the primary source of information for any traveler in today's world seemed to say quite the contrary. This being the case, he decided to visit every department and find out how they performed their tasks. He found his staff courteous and polite and extremely friendly with the guests. But the feedback forms gave bad ratings to the hotel only on the behavior of its employees. He decided to personally write back to those customers who had given their email ids. The response he received from 17 of them (out of the 47 email ids) made him decide that there were issues in the way people behaved with the guests. He decided to address his team – as he referred to all employees and let them know of the feedback received. Each one of them told that the guests were being unreasonable and hence we should not bother too much about it, but look at the positive feedback. He decided to seek the help of Deekshita Ma'am as he referred to her since his Sinai days. She was only too eager to help him however he had to wait for two weeks to get her to Nainital. Her decision was to come as a guest.

## Literature Review

“Emotional contagion” is defined as the flow of emotions from one person to another, with the receiver “catching” the emotions that the sender displays (Schoenewolf 1990). The psychologist Elaine Hatfield has theorized emotional contagion as a two-step process: Step 1: We imitate people; if someone smiles at you, you smile back. Step 2: Changes in mood through faking it. If you smile you feel happy, if you frown you feel bad. She along with John Cacioppo and Richard Rapson has extensively researched emotional contagion and found that people's conscious assessments of others' feelings were heavily influenced by what others said but people's own emotions, were more influenced by others' nonverbal cues as opposed to what they were really feeling. In an organizational setting, emotional contagion has been examined to understand how emotional contagion affects group performance and employee/customer interactions. The latter has been found

to be especially important in a service environment where human interactions influence a customer's evaluation of the service provided. Researchers Tsai and Huang 2002, Pugh 2001 and Verbeke 1997 found that in the context of service interactions, emotional contagion creates a ripple effect of emotions from service employees to customers. Experimental study by Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler (2006) examined the influence of the extent of service employees' display of positive emotions and the authenticity of their emotional labor display on customers' emotional states and subsequently, on customers' assessments of the service interaction and their relationship with the service provider. The researchers have examined the effect of emotional contagion and emotional labor on the customers' assessment of the service interaction. However, for the current study Deekshita decided to restrict only to analyze the effect of emotional contagion on customers.

## Methodology

Deekshita landed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April with her mother in tow – a graceful lady in her late 60's. She decided to do her booking online through one of the portals most used by the customers. She also checked with the other past guests about their feedback which was bad. She was surprised that none of the guests complained about the amenities in the hotel, which they felt was quite good given the advantage that the resort had one of the best views of the lake and the other rooms provided a good view of the hill side and their own garden. None of them felt disappointed about the food or travel assistance provided. Five of them recounted incidents of rude behavior from the staff.

She had informed the reception about her arrival and her itinerary while in Nainital, so that they could provide adequate support. She had made her own arrangements for transportation from the airport, since she was sure her mother and she would want to explore some other places/ eating joints. She walked into the reception at 3pm and flashed her booking message, when the lady at the reception refused to complete her check in. After being asked to wait for 15 minutes, she was finally told that the guy with whom she had been interacting had gone out for an hour and would be back soon. But the lady decided to continue with the check in and handed over the room key to Deekshita who took that wanted to be led to the room. The room boy came over to assist the mother and daughter with their sparse luggage comprising of a suitcase and

two handbags. They got into the elevator and were told that their room is on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. But a second later, it just jumped into the air – a short jump and landed with a thud. Deekshita's mother gave out a scream. The roomboy just laughed and said that it has happened for the fourth time in the day, though the technician had attended to it in the morning. So she asked him what can be done next, he said we'll have to use the stairs. Pointing to her mother, Deekshita said I don't think she can take it since she has pain in her joints. He just replied, "Madam this terrain is not suitable for people her age, so you should have thought about that when you brought her along." Deekshita asked him if her mother can be allowed to use the service lift, on account of her condition, he said nothing can be done. So then with no other option available, her mother the sporting person at her age decided to take the winding stairs, quite a beauty, but quite an effort for her mother since the steps were quite tall and was making it difficult for the mother. Deekshita watched in horror as her mother groaned after every few steps. Now she wondered how they could go out even. Finally they landed in their room, and as many had earlier said, the room did have a beautiful view because though they did not get to have the Lakeside view, their window was facing a beautiful lawn lined with bottle neck palms dotted with poinsettias of different colors breaking the monotony of the green carpet of lawn and palms. Once inside the room they found that all fixtures were as good as they had mentioned in the descriptions online. So the next thing the mother and daughter decided to evaluate was coffee – a habit the family had developed over the years of their stay in Chennai. Coffee arrived with its heady aroma, not so much like the filter kaapi – but a strongly brewed coffee with just the right quantity of coffee but with sprinklings of chocolate on top. This was quite a surprise and yet delectable.

By 6 pm the mother daughter duo decided to step out for a view of the Lake. As they reached the lobby, they found a young girl of about 7 years waiting for apparently her parents. Her parents, a couple in their mid-thirties were at the reception and in a few minutes the interactions seemed to have soured. One could hear the mother of the girl yelling at one of the guys at the reception. Deekshita slowly approached the couple to understand why they seemed so agitated. The husband Mr. Ajay Sharma just told Deekshita that they had been staying for close to 3 days and every two or three hours the television unit provided in their room stops functioning. They had complained

about it several times, but no action seems to have been taken. They asked if another unit could be provided to them since their daughter was getting bored. His wife hearing this conversation pitched in saying "I just asked them thinking that they could easily install another unit from another room. So the girl in the reception just told me that - Madam, we cannot do such a thing, since it is against the rule to move/ relocate objects to other rooms. I just told her that I've come on a vacation from a busy work-life and all I want is some piece of mind and not my daughter howling for her favorite television programs. The girl told me Madam you are not the only woman who's employed, even we have families and children and trust me my daughter would not dare throw a tantrum like your one does. I think you've not given instilled good manners in her. I then lost my cool – the last thing I would like to hear is that I've not brought up my child well, since I take great care to ensure that I give her only food prepared at home and take care of her homework and ensure she gets adequate attention in every which way." Deekshita spoke calmly to the husband and asked him what was the response to the complaint given – he said he had been making at least two calls to the reception and following up with a guy named Akash who said he's in touch with the electrician and who had accompanied the electrician once. Ajay asked his wife to not lose her temper and seemed to be begging to her, meanwhile their daughter started screaming saying "Papa please ask these uncles to fix our TV, I'm getting bored." Both parents were arguing amongst themselves and in this caucus, the girl took the sword which was in the hand of one of the mannequins on display – a male mannequin dressed to look like a Rajput soldier with his sword in hand. Now the sight of this child with the sword in hand was quite scary and she pretended to fight with other guests in the lobby, who were about to leave or those going to their rooms. Strangely enough she went and whacked one of the foreigners who gave out a scream. Then again there was an argument with staff accusing the parents of poor upbringing and the verbal duel continued. Deekshita was shocked at the turn of events, and suddenly found herself face to face with the tourist who just got attacked. She said she felt sorry and apologized on behalf of others – not knowing who others were – the hotel staff or the parents or Indians at large. He seemed quite shocked and perplexed and mumbled out an "It's ok." After this, he told how he had been requesting the travel desk to arrange a tourist cab to visit some of the places around Nainital, and how he had not been informed

that it was being attended to. So he was curious about it and came downstairs to enquire and the staff just said why are you being impatient, we told you it will be arranged in 2 hours' time and it shall be done. He seemed a little upset about the staff's inability to comprehend his eagerness.

Deekshita continued for the next one week, trying to find out if there are such stories that she could utilize to analyze the situation. She found five more guests who were willing to share their experiences. She finally sat down and came to the same conclusion that Ankur had arrived at – the customers' complaints about the amenities were only 10% of the total complaints or recommendations. But the complaints were mostly in terms of the staff's behavior. She decided to use the concept of Emotional Contagion to explain how emotions are contagious not just diseases and yawning. She had videotaped a few of the instances without the knowledge of the staff just to prove her point that every time a customer raised his voice and spoke and the staff responded with a louder voice, the decibels kept rising and there seemed to be no end to the arguments. However, if the staff apologized and said "We'll attend to that" – it seemed to have a calming effect.

Her suggestions were as follows:

1. Get an expert to conduct a workshop on emotional contagion – explain the effects of one's emotions on another individual. In a service environment, one is more dependent on the personal interactions unlike a store environment wherein the product quality is probably one of the key parameters influencing consumers' buying decision.
2. Formulate an action plan comprising of the various service encounters an individual guest can have various departments and clearly identify basis past stories, situations that can go wrong and train staff to appropriately handle them. She felt the staff needed to be taught how to respond positively in every circumstance.
3. Ask guests to give feedback about each individual who had interacted with them and punish those who have misbehaved with the guests.

## Conclusion

This study was an attempt to help the management analyze the situation on hand and help them arrive at an action plan that could be implemented to improve the quality of ratings and feedback received from the guests. Here the analysis of service encounters was conducted basis the researcher's (Deekshita's) experience as a customer, hence, the resort has to identify a list of possible service encounter situations to understand the situations where human interactions are crucial. Post this, an emotional contagion workshop for all employees would be necessary to get all concerned on board to appreciate the application of this concept and implementation. Then an action plan with clear instructions to employees can be rolled out and this should be followed by a feedback mechanism to monitor the effectiveness of the same.

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