

# Emotion-Reaction Guidelines for Service Interactions

## Emotions-Reaktions-Guidelines für Serviceinteraktionen

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**Abstract** — The digital transformation and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are creating a critical situation for stationary retail. Emotions are highly relevant in this service context and represent an important part of the service experience. In particular, the ability of service personnel to understand and react to the emotions of customers is crucial to the success of service interactions. The goal of this paper is to design emotion-based guidelines for service personnel. These emotion-reaction guidelines (ERG) are intended to provide service personnel with specific options for adapting interactions to the emotional situation of customers. Based on a literature review, expert interviews and a digital workshop, ERG for six different customer emotions were designed, rated and summarized in the form of a digital whiteboard.

**Zusammenfassung** — Die digitale Transformation und die Auswirkungen der COVID-19-Pandemie schaffen eine kritische Situation für den stationären Handel. Emotionen sind in diesem Servicekontext von hoher Relevanz und stellen einen wichtigen Teil des Serviceerlebnisses dar. Insbesondere die Fähigkeit des Servicepersonals, die Emotionen der Kund:innen zu verstehen und korrekt auf diese zu reagieren, ist entscheidend für den Erfolg von Serviceinteraktionen. Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, emotionsbasierte Handlungsempfehlungen für das Servicepersonal zu gestalten. Diese Emotions-Reaktions-Guidelines (ERG) sollen dem Servicepersonal konkrete Möglichkeiten bieten, Interaktionen an die emotionale Situation der Kund:innen anzupassen. Basierend auf einer Literaturrecherche, Experteninterviews und einem digitalen Workshop wurden ERG für sechs verschiedene Kund:innenemotionen entworfen, bewertet und auf einem digitalen Whiteboard zusammengefasst.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Stationary retail is a domain suffering from both digital transformation and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation makes it essential for retailers to design innovative services to meet the new challenges [1]–[4].

The unique characteristics of stationary retail lie in the qualifications of the service personnel, the resulting services and, in particular, the possibility of personal interaction between customers and service personnel [5]–[7]. A promising approach can therefore be to strengthen the service interaction (interaction between customers and service personnel) and thereby to support stationary retail.

Emotions are highly relevant in the service context and represent an important part of the service experience [5], [8]. Especially the ability of service personnel to understand and react to the emotions of the customer, is crucial to the success of service interactions [9]–[11]. An empathetic service interaction offers the opportunity to improve the service experience and build sustainable customer relationships [12], [13].

The goal of this paper is to design emotion-based guidelines for service personnel. These emotion-reaction guidelines (ERG) are intended to provide service personnel with specific options for adapting service interactions to the emotional situation of the customer. The ERG are based on a literature review as well as expert interviews with customers and service personnel [14], [15]. In addition to the actual design of the ERG, these were evaluated and rated in several workshops with potential customers. Finally, the evaluated ERG were summarized and illustrated in the form of a digital whiteboard.

This article is structured as follows. First, the current situation of stationary retailing is described. Subsequently, the relevance of emotions in the context of service design and

especially service interaction is explained. Finally, the design of the ERG is outlined and its illustration in the digital whiteboard is presented. The article ends with a conclusion and an outlook, in which digital support possibilities for the ERG are discussed in particular [16].

### II. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN STATIONARY RETAIL

The digital transformation and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are creating a critical situation for stationary retail. In particular, the growth of online retailing and the possibility of mobile shopping via smart devices are creating new challenges [2], [4]. In this context, declining customer frequency and stagnating sales show up as consequences of a change in the behavior of customers [17]. This situation is supported by the fact that 67% of Millennials and 56% of Gen-Xers prefer to shop online [18]. Modern customers are better informed and expect a personalized service experience [19], [20]. Smartphones enable customers to access the Internet regardless of time and place, which leads to a change in customer behavior as well as customer expectations [2], [21].

Although some retailers are able to retain their customers through multi-channel strategies, so-called Internet pure players account for a large share of (online) commerce, with Amazon alone accounting for a large share of online sales [19], [22].

The possibility of personal interaction between customers and service personnel represent a unique feature of stationary retail [5]–[7]. From the customer's perspective, this (service) interaction can be representative of the perception of the entire service [23]–[25]. A service interaction creates a connection between the service personnel and the customer, which can be the basis for mutual value creation [26], [27].

The currently predominant COVID-19 pandemic intensifies the critical situation for stationary retail, not only because stores are oftentimes temporarily closed but because the sales personnel has difficulties to fully recognize the customer's emotions displayed by facial expressions due to facemasks [28], [29]. In a situation in which the stationary retail is reliant on offering customers good service, this can lead to inappropriate responses. Empathy, care and concern are especially important for ensuring appropriate interactions in these challenging times [30].

### III. EMOTIONS IN SERVICE INTERACTIONS

Emotions influence how people behave, think, communicate and interact [8], [31], [32]. An emotion is the reaction of the human body to an occurring stimulus, e.g. to an event or a thought of certain relevance [8]. Emotions lead to high mental activities and are perceived as positive or negative [31].

Customer perception of stationary retail is strongly influenced by emotions. Both the design of the store and the interaction between service personnel and the customer have an effect on the emotional situation of the customer [5], [33]. The emotional situation of the customer thus forms an important part of the service experience and has an impact on customer behavior, perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty [5], [8], [34], [35].

The behavior and abilities of the service personnel play a critical role in service design, as they can have a significant impact on customer experiences and perceptions [11], [23], [25], [36]. In this context, the way of service interaction can influence the perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and the emotional situation of the customer [10], [11], [23], [25].

An important aspect of successful service interactions and customer satisfaction is the ability of service personnel to understand and react appropriately to the emotional situation of the customer [9]–[11].

Recognizing and reacting to emotions can be challenging without specific training, and even experienced service personnel may have difficulties in correctly perceiving customer emotions [11], [16]. For example, the assessment of customer emotions by the service personnel does not always correspond to those of the customers [11], [37]. Negative emotions are particularly relevant, as they can have a much stronger influence on customers than positive emotions [38]. Negative emotions can have a negative impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty, leading to damaging word-of-mouth [12], [38]–[41]. Customers with positive emotions, on the other hand, show higher satisfaction and improved loyalty [5].

### IV. EMOTION-REACTIONS GUIDELINES

The aim of this paper is the design and evaluation of ERG, which are intended to provide service personnel with specific options to react correctly to the emotional situation of the customer.

#### Design of the ERG

Based on a literature review and expert interviews with service personnel in stationary retail, a total of 117 specific ERG and 30 general ERG were designed. In the course of the literature review, primarily service, retail and marketing literature was used and evaluated [37], [42], [15].

In this context, ERG could be identified for a total of nine different emotional situations, which were categorized according to the Circumplex Model of Affect for better clarity. The Circumplex Model of Affect is one of the most cited

emotion models and represents emotions using the two dimensions *arousal* (activated vs. deactivated) and *pleasure* (positive vs. negative). The model is able to represent any emotional situation in terms of a certain degree of these two dimensions. For example, the emotion *happy* arises from the combination of a high activation (*arousal*) and a pleasant sensation (*pleasure*). In this way, a multitude of emotions can be intuitively arranged in a two-dimensional space [8], [43].

Using the dimensions presented, four quadrants (Q1 to Q4) can be distinguished within the model [16]. **Q1:** negative activated – *angry/frustrated, embarrassed, afraid*, **Q2:** positive activated – *interested, happy/excited*, **Q3:** negative deactivated – *sad/tired, bored*, **Q4:** positive deactivated – *relieved, relaxed/satisfied* (see Figure 1).

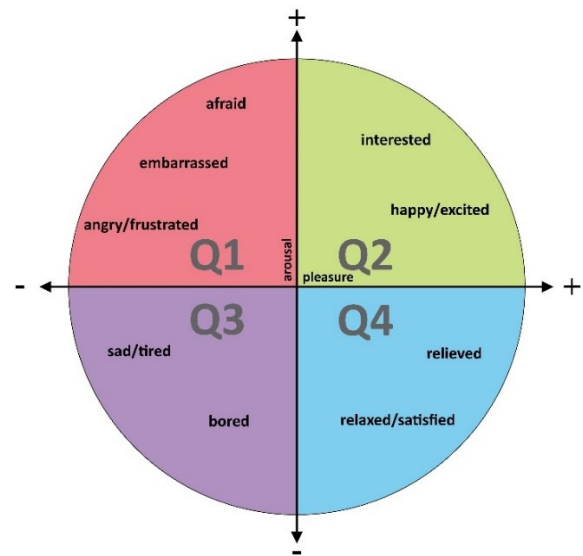


Figure 1: Circumplex Model of Affect

#### Evaluation of the ERG

For the evaluation of the ERG, six digital workshops with a total of 24 participants were conducted (four participants per workshop). The age of the participants ranges from 22 to 32 years, with an average age of 24.75 years. 62.5% of the participants are male and 37.5% are female. All participants stated that they regularly shop in stationary retail stores.

The workshops were realized using the digital collaborative whiteboard platform *Miro* in combination with the telecommunications and videoconferencing app *Skype*.

The integrated voting tool in *Miro* was used to evaluate the ERG. For each emotional situation the participants could favor three ERG. Furthermore, ERG could be rated as **1:** *inappropriate*, **2:** *general and valid for any emotion* or **3:** *belonging to another emotion*. Also, ERG were considered as *inconspicuous* if they have been evaluated by fewer than 8 participants.

In addition to the ERG favored for each emotion, three main results emerged from the workshops: **I:** The allocation of the ERG from the literature review to the respective emotional situation was perceived as appropriate by the participants. Thus, the ERG offer meaningful and appropriate guidelines for the respective emotional situations. **II:** For the emotional situation *angry/frustrated*, two ERG were found to be *inappropriate*: "treat the customer with humor" and "show submissive behavior". According to the participants the former is due to the

fact that it is difficult to meet a person's sense of humor. The latter is related to the fact that the service personnel should keep their own dignity and not put up with everything the customer does. The identification of this ERG is of great importance in terms of the emotional strain that service personnel may face as a result of emotional labor [44], [45].

**III:** Some of the ERG that are directly associated with an emotional situation were evaluated as *general and valid for any emotion*. These ERG were grouped together as *general ERG*.

*Summary and Illustration of the ERG*

The results of the research and the workshop were finally summarized in a digital whiteboard which can be viewed following this link: [https://miro.com/app/board/o9J\\_lrDIn6s=/](https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_lrDIn6s=/)

The basic structure of the digital whiteboard is based on the four quadrants presented and the nine different emotional situations in terms of color and content (see Figure 1). The upper part of the digital whiteboard summarizes the results of the literature review and expert interviews (see Digital Whiteboard: Section A). In the lower part of the digital whiteboard the results of the workshops can be found (see Digital Whiteboard: Section B). The literature used for the ERG can be found on the right side of the digital whiteboard (see Digital Whiteboard: Section C).

The best-rated ERG can also be found in Table 1.

TABLE I. BEST-RATED ERG

negative Emotions	
Emotion	ERG
general negative emotions	• offer help [46]
embarrassed	• take the customer seriously [47], [48]
angry/frustrated	• leave customers alone who want to be left alone [49]
afraid	• open body language, respectful and polite interaction [37], [48], [50]–[53]
sad/tired	• open, interested, honest and appreciative behavior towards the customer [51], [53]
bored	• show the customer something new about the product or lead him/her into new areas of the store [53]–[56]
positive Emotions	
Emotion	ERG
general positive emotions	• show authentic, positive emotions; empathic and authentic behavior [57], [58]
happy/excited	• show positive emotions and mirror positive behavior [14], [15], [37], [58]
interested	• interaction and communication through polite support and kind words [14], [15]
relaxed/satisfied	• friendly and efficient interaction [59], [60]
relieved	• show calmness and competence [14], [15]

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

With the overarching goal of supporting stationary retail in the digital transformation, this paper focused on its existing strengths: the interaction between customer and service personnel. An important aspect of successful service interaction and customer satisfaction is the ability of service personnel to understand and react appropriately to the emotional situation of the customer [9]–[11]. The emotional situation of the customer forms an important part of the service experience and has an impact on customer behavior, perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty [5], [8], [34], [35].

To ensure that the customer has a pleasant and valuable visit, we designed und rated a high number of ERG for different

emotional situations. These ERG are intended to provide service personnel with specific options for adapting interactions to the emotional situation of the customer. By presenting the ERG as a digital whiteboard, easy access (also outside the scientific community) is provided. The digital whiteboard also offers the opportunity to collect further opinions on the ERG or completely new ERG via the comment function.

A limitation of this contribution is that it deals exclusively with the reaction to emotions. In view of the fact that recognizing customer emotions can also be challenging, service personnel should likewise be supported in this area. One possibility to support service personnel in recognizing emotions is offered by digital emotion-self-assessment interfaces [61]. In addition, it could be valuable to support the ERG more strongly with IT by implementing it in the form of a mobile application. In this way, the management and specific selection of the ERG could also be ensured directly in the service environment [16]. Furthermore, service interactions also take place in other branches, such as restaurants or hotels. These branches represent a promising source for the development of further ERG.

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