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The proactive employee on the floor of the store and the impact on customer satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines employee proactivity (i.e., the employee initiates face-to-face contact with the customer on the floor of the store) and its impact on customer satisfaction. Two empirical studies (one survey and one field experiment) were conducted in a grocery retailing context. Both studies showed that employee proactivity boosted customer satisfaction. Moreover, the impact of employee proactivity on satisfaction was sequentially mediated by perceived employee effort and perceived employee performance. In relation to previous studies showing that many characteristics and behaviors of the employee in the service encounter influence the customer, the present study contributes by adding that the way in which the service encounter begins is causally potent, too.

1. Introduction

Many studies in service and retail settings show that several characteristics and behaviors of frontline employees influence customer reactions in the service encounter (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Liao and Chuang, 2004; Winsted, 2000). Such studies indicate that human beings are indeed susceptible to influence stemming from other human beings and, in a setting with commercially-based interactions, that the employee is a potent source of influence. The present study is an attempt to contribute to this literature by examining one particular aspect of employee behavior that has been neglected in existing research: the extent to which the employee is proactive in initiating contact with the customer.

The core of the employee proactivity construct in the present study is the same as in existing organizational literature. It comprises a self-starting approach to doing things before one is told to do them, not waiting until one must respond to a demand, personal initiative, and taking charge of a situation (Crant, 2000; Frese and Fay, 2001; Grant and Ashford, 2008; Rank et al., 2007; Raub and Liao, 2012; Thomas et al., 2010). In the present study, however, our focus is on employee proactivity in a more narrow sense than what is included in the organizational literature's proactivity construct; here, we are interested in the employee initiating contact with the customer when both parties are in the same store or service environment. Typically, this entails the employee coming forward to the customer with conversation starters such as “Hi, are you looking for anything in particular?” and “Hi, can I help you?”.

The impact of this particular aspect of employee proactivity has hitherto received limited interest in service and retailing research. It has been shown, however, that proactive salespersons sell more and earn higher commissions than less proactive salespersons (Bateman and Crant, 1999). Moreover, in service-related research, employee proactivity has mainly been studied in terms of service failures (e.g., de Jong and de Ruyter, 2004; Miller et al., 2000; Smith et al., 1999), and some studies indicate that proactive employee behavior in failure situations enhances recovery satisfaction (de Jong and de Ruyter, 2004; Kelley et al., 1993). Most service encounters, however, do not result in failures. This calls for research on the impact of employee proactivity also in situations in which no failures occur.

An examination of employee proactivity should be seen in the light of several aspects. First, employee proactivity (in the present study) is something that occurs in the very first phase of a service encounter; it has to do with the employee initiating an encounter. Given the potential for first impressions to inform both attribute evaluations and overall evaluations (Lindgaard et al., 2006; Rabin and Schrag, 1999), employee proactivity can be seen as the platform on which the remaining parts of an encounter rest.

Second, from a practical point of view, many service and retail firms have scripts with instructions for frontline employees with respect to what to do in relation to customers (Tansik and Smith, 1991; Nickson et al., 2005). And in many cases, the scripts encourage employee proactivity in the initial phase of a service encounter. The famous Starbucks Green Apron Book, for example, requests the employees to “start a conversation”, while Hilton Hotel instructions comprise a call to “show initiative”. So far, however, academic research has not been able to offer much empirical support for such activities.

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Third, employees represent a significant and controllable cost for the retailer. Many retailers therefore view employees as cost drivers rather than sales drivers – particularly in low-growth situations (Ton, 2012). And in many economies growth has indeed been low during recent years. Consequently, many retailers have been reducing the number of in-store sales staff (Leibowitz, 2010). In a business environment characterized by more or less permanent low economic growth (at least in the West), sometimes referred to as "the new normal", further staff reductions may be expected. This thus implies fewer opportunities for employees to display proactivity. To this we may add the rapid development in automation technology. Several observers have noted that many traditional activities – including those involving interaction with customers – will be replaced by machines and robots (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Rifkin, 1995). Indeed, it is already possible to check out from a grocery store without interacting with a human cashier and to order drinks from robots in a bar. An assessment of the impact of employee proactivity at the present moment, and in terms of an analysis that allows proactivity to be absent versus present, may therefore provide clues about future consequences of customers' retail experiences before the development towards fewer employees in retail environments escalates further.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the impact of employee proactivity – in terms of initiating a service encounter – on customer satisfaction. We view customer satisfaction as an overall post-purchase evaluation variable, and this particular dependent variable was chosen because of several reasons. First, it is used in many models and theories attempting to explain the influence of employee characteristics and behaviors (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Winsted, 2000). Second, it is related to several other variables with cost and revenue implications for firms, such as repurchasing and word-of-mouth (Anderson et al., 1994; Szymanski and Henard, 2001) as well as shareholder value (Anderson et al., 2004). Third, it is used frequently as a performance indicator in firms (Mintz and Currim, 2013; Morgan and Rego, 2006; Morgan et al., 2005; Szymanski and Henard, 2001). For the present examination, the specific satisfaction construct is store satisfaction. One previous study has identified a positive link between service employee proactivity and customer satisfaction at the firm level (in a hotel setting) and with respect to the general, broad notion of employee proactivity (Raub and Liao, 2012). In the present study, however, we examine this link at the customer level and with respect to employee proactivity in terms of initiating service encounters. Two empirical studies (one survey and one field experiment) were carried in the context of grocery retailing to assess the impact of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

In broad terms, proactive service employees rely on their own initiative rather than waiting to be prompted by their supervisors, their coworkers, or their customers (Raub and Liao, 2012). Our focus in the present study, however, is on the employee's proactive behavior in terms of activities initiated by the employee to get in contact with the customer when both parties are in the same store or service environment.

The first main assumption is that employee proactivity has a positive impact on perceived employee performance, which is the customer's evaluation of employee service behaviors along a bad-good continuum and *after* interaction has taken place (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982; Liao and Chuang, 2004). This experience-based aspect of performance is sometimes referred to as "actual" or "current" performance (Bolton and Drew, 1991) in order to distinguish it from expectations of performance that may exist *before* an interaction (Brady et al., 2002; Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Perceived employee performance is typically used as a variable in studies in which the personnel is one of several store attributes to be evaluated by customers (e.g., Gómez et al., 2004).

In general, it has been suggested that proactivity is admired in most societies and that proactive individuals are highly regarded (Pitt et al., 2002). Moreover, in the specific case of employee proactivity vis-à-vis customers, the results in Wels-Lips et al. (1998) indicate that customers perceive initiative stemming from the employee as more positively charged compared to when the customer has to be the initiating party. Given a positive charge of the proactivity of the other party in an interaction, one would thus expect that employee proactivity could have a positive impact on perceived employee performance in the case of a service encounter.

Indeed, there are several affect-based reasons why this should be expected. First, employee proactivity can signal employee presence, something that has been shown to enhance customers' positive affect (Söderlund, 2016). Employee proactivity can also signal that the presence of the customer has been acknowledged by the employee. Such acknowledgements of one's existence appear to be related to the fundamental human needs of belongingness, inclusion, and intimacy (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Peplau and Perlman, 1982). Therefore, it is expected that acknowledgement of the customer enhances his or her positive affect. Moreover, employee proactivity can signal employee availability if further service is needed, and availability is likely to contribute to positive affect, too. Availability may also reduce concerns about waiting time (which appears to be negatively charged for most customers; Taylor, 1994). Then, in the next step, we assume that positive affect stemming from the presence, acknowledgment, and availability of employees has a positive influence on perceived employee performance. This is consonant with the view that affective reactions elicited by one object is likely to inform evaluations of this object in a valence-congruent way (Forgas, 1995; Pham, 2004).

Another affective route of influence is also possible, because employee proactivity has been shown to enhance the employee's job satisfaction (Greguras and Diefendorff, 2010; Li et al., 2010; Seibert et al., 1999; Thomas et al., 2010) and even life satisfaction (Greguras and Diefendorff, 2010). In other words, it can be satisfying to initiate activities and to take charge of a situation. Given that the employee's feelings can be transferred to the customer when these two parties interact (Pugh, 2001), the employee's positive feelings related to job satisfaction can be carried over to the customer so that they influence perceived employee performance in a positive way. In addition, proactive behavior from the employee can be interpreted by the customer as indicative of a proactive personality, which in turn has been shown to be positively associated with attributions of charisma (Crant and Bateman, 2000). And such attributions can have a positive impact on perceived employee performance. Given these routes of influence, then, the following is hypothesized:

H1. Employee proactivity is positively associated with perceived employee performance.

In the next step of the customer's information processing activities, and to arrive at an overall evaluation in terms of store satisfaction, it is assumed that the customer evaluates the performance of individual store attributes (such as the personnel) and integrates these evaluations into an overall assessment (Anderson, 1971; Mittal et al., 1998). Moreover, in a service setting, it is expected that perceived employee performance has a particularly strong impact on overall satisfaction. The main reason is that the employee in this setting *is* the firm from the customer's point of view (Bitner et al., 1990; Crosby et al., 1990; Solomon et al., 1985). In other words, given the traditional characteristic of services as inseparable from the individual who provides them, clues derived from employee behavior are likely to be particularly informative for the customer's overall view of the firm. Similarly, given that services are intangible and therefore less easily evaluated than goods, the employee is indeed tangible and is therefore assumed to influence overall evaluations of the employee's firm. In empirical terms, several studies have resulted in a positive association between perceived employee performance and overall customer satisfaction (e.g., Huddleston et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2001; Liao and Chuang, 2004;

Mägi and Julander, 1996). Hence the following is hypothesized:

H2. Perceived employee performance is positively associated with customer satisfaction.

H1 and H2 imply a view of the impact of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction as mediated by perceived employee performance. To assess this aspect, the following is hypothesized:

H3. The impact of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction is mediated by perceived employee performance.

Given H3, it is thus expected that employee proactivity would result in a higher level of customer satisfaction than no employee proactivity. Support for an effect of this type has been provided by Raub and Liao (2012) at the firm level of analysis and with respect to a broad notion of employee proactivity. Support also exists in service failure research, in the sense that proactive service recovery activities have been shown to have a positive impact on recovery satisfaction (de Jong and de Ruyter, 2004). Conversely, when the customer has to initiate the recovery attempt, customers' overall ratings are relatively low (Kelley et al., 1993). In any event, and as a somewhat stronger test of the net effect on customer satisfaction (given that it can be easier to obtain significant results with a correlation analysis based on continuous variables than with a group comparison), we also test the following alternative to H3:

H4. Customers who encounter proactive employees respond with higher customer satisfaction compared to customers who do not encounter proactive employees.

3. Study 1

Study 1 was an attempt to assess H1–H4 with data generated by a questionnaire completed by customers of one particular grocery retailer.

3.1. Data collection and participants

The focal store was a grocery retailer (store size: 6000 m^2, 160 employees, and 1.5 million customers per year). On average, some 25–30 employees are located on the floor of the store at a given point in time and thus they are in the position of engaging in customer interactions. A questionnaire was sent to a sample of the store's customers, and the analysis below was based on the responses by those customers who participated (n = 739; 152 men and 587 women).

3.2. Measures

Employee proactivity was assessed with the following question: "During your most recent visit to the store, did any employee made an attempt to get in contact with you?". Two response alternatives were provided (no versus yes). They were scored as no = 1 and yes = 2, thus a higher score indicates a higher level of employee proactivity.

Perceived employee performance was assessed with the question "Please rate the personnel with respect to…", followed by the items "attention", "accessibility if you need help", "knowledge if you ask about something", "interest for you as a customer", "helpfulness", and "friendliness". Similar items for performance evaluations of the personnel appear in, for example, Gómez et al. (2004), Huddleston et al. (2009), Johnson et al. (2001), Liao and Chuang (2004), and Mägi and Julander (1998). In our case, each item was scored on a 10-point scale (1 = poor performance, 10 = good performance). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.95. The average of the responses to the six items was used as the perceived employee performance indicator in the analysis.

Customer satisfaction was measured with Fornell's (1992) three satisfaction items, which have been employed in several national satisfaction barometers (Johnson et al., 2001). They have also been used in academic research (e.g., Anderson et al., 1994; Anderson et al., 2004; Fornell et al., 2006; Rego et al., 2013). The items were formulated as follows in the present study: "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with this store?" (1 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied), "To what extent does this store meet your expectations?" (1 = not at all, 10 = totally), and "Try to imagine a store that is perfect in every respect. How near or far from this ideal do you find this store?" (1 = very far from, 10 = cannot get any closer). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.91, and the average response to the three items was used as a satisfaction measure. As a validity check, a single-item measure of the intention to engage in word-of-mouth regarding the store (scored on a 10-point scale) was employed. The responses to this item were significantly and positively associated with customer satisfaction (r = 0.84, p < 0.01). The satisfaction measure thus behaved as expected in relation to many previous studies resulting in a positive association between customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth; this indicates that the satisfaction measure had an acceptable level of nomological validity. The means, standard deviations, and the zero-order correlations for the variables in the hypotheses are presented in the Appendix A.

3.3. Analysis and results

To test H1, we computed the zero-order correlation between the employee proactivity variable and perceived employee performance. The resulting correlation was positive and significant (r = 0.26, p < 0.01), thus providing support for H1. The correlation between perceived employee performance and customer satisfaction was significant, too (r = 0.68, p < 0.01). This means that H2 was supported.

For H3, stating that perceived employee performance mediates the association between employee proactivity and customer satisfaction, we used the Preacher and Hayes bootstrapping approach (Zhao et al., 2010). In our analysis, the independent variable was employee proactivity (thus scored as 1 for low proactivity and 2 for high proactivity). The mediating variable was perceived employee performance, and the dependent variable was customer satisfaction. A mediation assessment with Hayes' Model 4 indicated that employee proactivity had a positive impact on perceived employee performance (b = 1.01, p < 0.01) and that perceived employee performance had a positive impact on satisfaction (b = 0.59, p < 0.01). The direct employee proactivity-satisfaction link was not significant (b = −0.08, p = 0.40). Moreover, there was a significant indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis of 0.59 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI limits 0.47 and 0.72), thus suggesting that the effect of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction was mediated by perceived employee performance. H3 was thus supported. Given that the direct effect of employee proactivity on satisfaction was not significant, the outcome suggests that full mediation was at hand (Zhao et al., 2010).

Finally, with respect to H4, the level of customer satisfaction was higher for the customers who were subject to employee proactivity (M = 8.50, n = 152) compared to the customers subject to no employee proactivity (M = 7.99, n = 584). This difference was significant (t = 4.19, p < 0.01). Thus H4 was supported.

3.4. Discussion

The results from Study 1 indicate that the net satisfaction effect was a higher level of satisfaction for those customers who reported that they had experienced employee proactivity during the most recent store visit. The results also indicate that the positive effect of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction was mediated by perceived employee performance.

Some limitations, however, characterize Study 1. First, employee proactivity was operationalized in terms of the most recent store visit. This may invite problems in recalling what actually happened when time passes from (a) the most recent visit to (b) completing a questionnaire (and the questionnaire contained no information about when the most recent visit occurred). In addition, there was no validity check

for the employee proactivity measure. Moreover, a questionnaire of the type used in Study 1 captures natural variation in what goes on in a store in terms of employee behavior. This is not necessarily a flaw, yet it means that the researcher has little knowledge about what happens in a store beyond the participants' subjective view. To address these limitations, a second study was conducted – a field experiment in which employee proactivity was manipulated. For the second study it was also decided to introduce an additional variable that may give more precision with respect to the mechanisms involved in a mediation chain, namely perceived employee effort.

4. Study 2

Study 2 was a field experiment designed to re-test H2 and H4 with another research method. The purpose of Study 2 was also to test additional hypotheses regarding the potentially mediating influence of perceived employee effort. To be able to integrate the new hypotheses with H2 and H4 from Study 1, the Study 2 hypotheses are presented with new numbers in ascending order below.

4.1. Perceived employee effort as an additional variable

In general, effort is the amount of energy put into a behavior or a series of behavior, while *perceived* effort is the amount of energy an observer believes an actor has invested in a behavior (Mohr and Bitner, 1995). With respect to customers' views of effort expended by suppliers, perceived supplier effort has been defined as the customer's perception of how much money, managerial time, and hard work there is behind the supplier's activities (Kirmani and Wright, 1989; Modig et al., 2014). Our focus here, however, is on the customer's perceptions of the effort expended by the employee with whom the customer interacts. This notion of employee effort has been used by, for example, Mohr and Bitner (1995) and Söderlund and Sagfossen (2017). Given that humans in general are sensitive to the effort expended by interaction parties (Adams, 1963; Maslyn and Uhl-Bien, 2001; Morales, 2005; Söderlund and Sagfossen, 2017), and given also that employee proactivity demands extra effort by the employee compared to no proactivity, the following is hypothesized:

H1. Employee proactivity is positively associated with perceived employee effort

Several studies indicate that the effort undertaken by a supplier is interpreted as a quality signal by customers (Ambler and Hollier, 2004; Kirmani, 1997; Söderlund and Sagfossen, 2017). In other words, supplier effort can be seen as a thin slice of information (Hall et al., 2015) regarding quality from the customer's point of view. The main reasons are that high supplier effort indicates high supplier confidence, high supplier commitment (Kirmani and Wright, 1989; Modig et al., 2014), and high supplier motivation (Mohr and Bitner, 1995), and these aspects are likely to have a positive influence on customers' views of quality. We expect similar results for employee effort; we expect that high as opposed to low employee effort signals higher quality in the service provided by the employee, which we expect would enhance perceived employee performance. In addition, some authors have noted that a situation in which employees appear to be idle (i.e., low employee effort with our terminology) when customers are present is likely to be negatively charged for customers (Baker and Cameron, 1996). Therefore, it is assumed here that perceived employee effort is positively associated with perceived employee performance:

H2. Perceived employee effort is positively associated with perceived employee performance.

Perceived employee performance is assumed to affect customer satisfaction positively (i.e., H2 in Study 1), and we retest this hypothesis in Study 2:

H3. Perceived employee performance is positively associated with customer satisfaction.

Given perceived employee effort as a consequence of employee proactivity (H1), and given that perceived employee effort is likely to have a positive impact on perceived employee performance (H2), our reasoning implies that the impact of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction is serially mediated by perceived employee effort and perceived employee performance. Thus we hypothesize the following:

H4. The impact of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction is mediated by perceived employee effort and perceived employee performance.

Again, as in Study 1, the expected net effect of this is that customer satisfaction reaches a higher level for customers who are exposed to employee proactivity than customers who are not exposed to employee proactivity. This was confirmed in Study 1, and to retest this hypothesis in a setting with a different research method (i.e., a field experiment) the same hypothesis is used again within the frame of Study 2:

H5. Customers who encounter proactive employees respond with higher levels of customer satisfaction compared to customers who do not encounter proactive employees.

4.2. Data collection and participants

The focal store in Study 2 was the same as in Study 1. In Study 2, the employees were instructed to behave proactively vis-à-vis customers in the store during one full work day, and they were instructed to avoid any proactivity during the following work day. Instructions regarding this were given during meetings with the personnel at work these two days. Thus, in contrast to Study 1, Study 2 involved an active manipulation of employee proactivity. During both days, the author and one research assistant were positioned outside the cash desks to ask exiting customers if they wanted to participate in a study regarding the store they were just about to leave. As a reward for participating in the study, a candy bag from the store was offered (value: 1.5 euro). Sampling based on shoppers leaving stores is relatively common in the retail literature (e.g., Sweeney et al., 1999; Söderlund et al., 2014). One main advantage is that memory biases can be avoided when the data collection occurs in close proximity to the customer's store visit. In any event, in Study 2, this resulted in the participation of 187 customers (61 men, 126 women; $n = 102$ for the proactivity day, $n = 85$ for the no proactivity day). The data were collected individually for each participant during a face-to-face interview in which the researchers used a paper-based questionnaire to read questions and to capture the participants' responses.

4.3. Measures

Perceived employee effort was measured with the question "To what extent do you think that the personnel expended effort to get in contact with you today?", followed by a 10-point scale (1 = not at all, 10 = a lot). Similar items to measure employee effort in service encounters have been used, for example, by Mohr and Bitner (1995) and Söderlund and Sagfossen (2017). *Perceived employee performance* was measured with the item "Please rate the personnel's performance today", which was followed by a 10-point scale (1 = poor, 10 = good). This item appeared together with two filler items regarding the perceived performance of the store's assortment and its price level. Thus, in contrast to Study 1, the Study 2 measure of perceived employee performance was characterized by a higher level of aggregation. *Customer satisfaction* was measured with the question "How satisfied are you today with this store (your overall evaluation)?", and it was followed by a 10-point response format (1 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied). Morgan and Rego (2006) have indicated that such single-item satisfaction

measures are likely to be a good proxy for the three-item measure used in Study 1. In any event, and as a validity check for the satisfaction measure, we used a word-of-mouth intention measure ("How likely is it that you would recommend this store to friends and acquaintances?"; 1 = very unlikely, 10 = very likely). The zero-order correlation between the satisfaction measure and the responses to the word-of-mouth item was positive and significant ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the satisfaction measure behaved as expected from a nomological validity point of view. The means, standard deviations, and the zero-order correlations between the variables in the hypotheses are reported in the Appendix A.

As a manipulation check item, the following question was used: "Today, did the personnel initiate contact with you?". The response alternatives were "no" and "yes" (scored as 1 vs. 2). In addition, it should be noted that our reasoning involves an implicit assumption that employee proactivity is positively valenced for customers. Some authors, however, have indicated that most customers do not like aggressive sales persons (Jones, 1999), and an approaching store employee may indicate that unwelcome sales attempts are underway. In contrast, other authors believe that proactive persons are highly regarded (Pitt et al., 2002). To assess the valence of being subject to proactive employee behavior, the manipulation check item was followed by the question "How did you perceive that the personnel did/did not initiate contact with you?" (the use of the "did/did not" alternatives for this question was based on the response to the manipulation check item). The responses were scored on a 10-point scale (1 = very negative, 10 = very positive).

4.4. Analysis and results

The manipulation check item (i.e., "Today, did the personnel initiate contact with you?") generated a higher proportion of yes-answers in the proactivity condition (31% "yes") than in the no proactivity condition (12% "yes"). This difference was significant ($\chi^2 = 10.23$, $p < 0.1$), which indicates that the manipulation was effective in creating differences in employee proactivity between the two conditions. In addition, a comparison of the valenced reactions showed that the participants who were subject to such initiatives reacted more positively ($M = 9.50$) than the participants who were not subject to contact initiatives ($M = 7.01$). This difference was significant ($t = 6.72$, $p < 0.01$). The outcome thus suggests that employee proactivity was positively rather than negatively charged for the participants.

H1, stating that employee proactivity is positively associated with perceived employee effort, was tested by computing the zero-order correlation between the two variables. This correlation was positive and significant ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$), which provides support for H1. For H2, the zero-order correlation between perceived employee effort and perceived employee performance was positive and significant ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$). This thus indicates support for H2. Moreover, perceived employee performance was positively associated with customer satisfaction ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$). H3 was thus supported. The H3 outcome was the same as in Study 1 (in which this hypothesis was labeled H2).

The serial mediation hypothesis, H4, implies a casual chain of this type: employee proactivity – employee effort – employee performance – customer satisfaction. H4 was assessed with Hayes' Model 6 in an approach in which the independent variable was scored as no proactivity = 1 and proactivity = 2 based on what day the participants answered the store exit questions. The results indicated that the indirect effect (0.06) in the employee proactivity – employee effort – satisfaction chain was not significant (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI limits − 0.09 and 0.35), and that the indirect effect (0.02) in the employee proactivity – employee performance – satisfaction chain was not significant (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI limits − 0.08 and 0.15). Moreover, there was a significant indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis of 0.04 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI limits 0.006 and 0.11) with respect to the employee proactivity – employee effort – employee performance – customer satisfaction chain. This indicates that the effect of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction was sequentially mediated by perceived employee effort and perceived employee performance. H4 was thus supported. The direct effect of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction (0.36) was not significant ($p = 0.14$, 95% CI limits − 0.13 and 0.85), thus suggesting that full (yet relatively weak) mediation was at hand.

Finally, H5 was tested by comparing the level of customer satisfaction between the two conditions. The result was a higher level of satisfaction under the employee proactivity condition ($M = 8.72$, $n = 102$) than under the no proactivity condition ($M = 8.09$, $n = 85$). This difference was significant ($t = 2.75$, $p < 0.01$), thus providing support for H5.

4.5. Discussion

Study 2 showed that the net effect of employee proactivity was a higher level of customer satisfaction for customers who visited the store when the employees were instructed to be proactive compared to not being proactive. The results also show that the impact of employee proactivity on satisfaction was sequentially mediated by perceived employee effort and perceived employee performance.

5. General discussion

5.1. Contributions

The findings in the present study should be seen in the light of previous research documenting that copious characteristics and behaviors of employees influence customers in service encounters. Employee proactivity in a no service failure situation, and in terms of initiating a service encounter, however, has been an under-researched issue. Therefore, the findings add an additional employee variable – employee proactivity – to the portfolio of employee behaviors with implications for the customer's overall evaluation of a firm. The findings also contribute to the literature on employee proactivity in organization theory (e.g., Grant and Ashford, 2008; Thomas et al., 2010) by providing evidence regarding the effects of proactive employee behavior in the service encounter. Evidence for a positive employee proactivity–customer satisfaction link at the firm level has been provided by Raub and Liao (2012), and the present study complements that attempt by providing additional explanations and mediating variables at the customer level of analysis – and by examining the specific case of proactivity in *initiating* service encounters. In addition, given that employee proactivity requires empowerment, the present study adds to the empowerment literature, in which it is assumed that empowered employees will generate prosocial customer-oriented behavior (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2001).

Moreover, the findings contribute to the literature on the impact of perceived employee effort in service encounters. Sensitivity to the efforts of others – particularly lack of effort – appears to be a fundamental aspect of human behavior, and it has been documented since ancient times. For example, when Odysseus arrived to the land of the Cyclops, he noted with irritation the effort aversion of its inhabitants in this land of abundance. Presumably, this contributed to his infamous torment of one of them. Since then many societies have developed norms regarding the efforts of others, such as the Protestant work ethic, dislike for free riders and, in era in which the "customer is king", that employees should expend effort to take care of customers (Söderlund and Sagfossen, 2017). This thus suggest that the effort of others is a causally potent variable in social settings, including service encounters. To date, however, perceived employee effort has only been examined in a limited number of studies (Mohr and Bitner, 1995; Söderlund and Sagfossen, 2017).

5.2. Managerial implications

The main implication of the two empirical studies is straightforward: retailers who wish to boost customer satisfaction should encourage employee proactivity. The importance of proactivity should be stressed in recruitment processes, in training programs, and in instructions for employees. With respect to recruitment, some authors suggest that proactivity is a general personality trait (Bateman and Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000; Greguras and Diefendorff, 2010; Pitt et al., 2002; Rank et al., 2007). Given this, managers may consider testing candidates for a frontline job in terms of this particular trait. Moreover, and as already indicated, many firms use relatively detailed instructions for employees when it comes to what to do and what to say in interactions with customers (Tansik and Smith, 1991; Nickson et al., 2005). The results in the present studies imply that such instructions should encourage proactivity. One aspect related to this, however, calls for caution: enforcing proactivity with explicit scripts may be perceived by employees as reduced empowerment, given that empowerment is about the discretion to make independent day-to-day decisions about job-related activities (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). Empowerment has been shown to have several positive effects on employees (ibid.), meaning that a possibility exists that the enforcement of proactivity rules can attenuate such effects.

Given that managers are role models for employees, another implication is that managers should be encouraged to engage proactively with customers – particularly in settings allowing employees to see what is going on in terms of in-store interactions. An important task for managers who want to encourage employee proactivity is also to pay attention to demands on the employee to spend time backstage (i.e., in activities out of sight of customers). In addition, existing studies have shown that organizational variables such as employee affective commitment, participative leadership (Rank et al., 2007), and an initiative climate (Raub and Liao, 2012) seem to boost employee proactivity in a service setting. Therefore, interventions influencing such factors may be considered, too.

Employee proactivity, however, demands the presence of employees who can initiate contacts with customers. Yet as noted in the introduction, employees represent a significant and controllable cost for the retailer, and many retailers view employees as cost drivers (Ton, 2012). Therefore, in times of austerity and low growth, it is tempting to focus on minimizing costs by reducing staffing levels. This strategy, however, may actually reduce profitability. Ton (2008) argues that staffing levels tend to have the most pronounced effect on tasks that take place behind the scenes. For example, reducing staff levels is likely to (a) increase the presence of poorly selling or obsolete goods that instead should be returned to suppliers and (b) decrease the visibility of items that are supposed to be on display but instead remain lingering in the back room where customers cannot see them (a.k.a. phantom products). To this we may add that reducing the number of employees is likely to reduce also the number of employee-initiated contacts with customers, and the results of our two studies suggest that this will attenuate customer satisfaction. This thus means that managers should be mindful about the customer satisfaction-related consequences of reducing the number of employees.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Some limitations characterize the present studies. With respect to employee proactivity, both Study 1 and Study 2 operationalized this variable in dichotomous terms. In conceptual terms, however, it is possible that it can be perceived in continuous terms by customers, and this aspect should be addressed in further studies. For example, a conceptualization in such terms would better capture the possibility that one specific employee can display different levels of proactivity. It will also allow for more precision in cases in which the customer encounters several employees (who may differ in proactivity levels) on the floor of the store.

Moreover, there are several ways for the employee to engage in proactive behavior, and all of them may not be equally effective from a satisfaction-boosting point of view. For example, and as indicated above, some specific employee approach behaviors may signal that aggressive sales attempts are underway – which most customers do not like (Jones, 1999). Other specific approach behaviors, however, may signal friendliness. Thus further research is needed to create a typology of proactive employee behaviors, and more research is needed to assess the relative impact of different types of proactivity.

It should also be noted that our focus has been on the effects of employee activities in *initiating* a service encounter. In the organizational literature, however, the notion of employee proactivity is broader than in the present studies; it comprises several additional points in time when the employee can be proactive. Such aspects should be assessed in further studies. For example, several authors have observed that the employee-customer conversation is a crucial aspect of service encounters (e.g., Grewal et al., 2002; Haas and Kenning, 2014; Nikolich and Sparks, 1995), and a conversation allows for employee proactivity to be displayed also during and after a conversation (e.g., in terms of following up on what has been agreed after the conversation has ended). In addition, the proactivity variable in the present studies comprised the notion of employee proactivity vis-à-vis a focal customer. Yet a focal customer on the floor of the store may observe employee proactivity vis-à-vis *other* customers who happen to be present, and this aspect may influence the focal customer's satisfaction level.

The present studies indicate that perceived employee effort and perceived employee performance mediated the impact of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction. However, additional mediators (not measured in the present studies) deserve attention. One of them is customer affect, which we assumed would have an impact on perceived employee performance. Moreover, depending on the context (e.g., the type of products sold and the number of employees in a store), it is possible that employee proactivity can be more or less expected by customers. This means that employee proactivity can influence perceived typicality and/or the level of perceived incongruency related to a service encounter. And such variables can mediate the impact of employee proactivity. In addition, in a service failure situation, organization-initiated recovery attempts have been shown to enhance justice perceptions (Smith et al., 1999), and justice perceptions are typically positively associated with customer satisfaction (Söderlund and Colliander, 2015). Given a general human sensitivity to justice aspects, however, particularly in terms of comparisons of effort expended by exchange parties (Adams, 1963), it is possible that such perceptions can be evoked also in a no failure situation and thus mediate the employee proactivity-customer satisfaction link. Another potential mediator, as indicated above, is employee job satisfaction; it may carry over to the customer in the service encounter so that it enhances customer satisfaction (Gelade and Young, 2005; Hogreve et al., 2017). Mediating variables with a potential to produce a *negative* impact also deserve attention. For example, employee proactivity in initiating a service encounter may imply a passive, reactive customer (in this particular phase of the service encounter). This can be interpreted as a loss of control from the customer's point of view – and reduced control is likely to go hand in hand with reduced customer satisfaction (Winsted, 2000).

As for moderating variables, it should be observed that the present studies comprised a grocery retailing setting in which the focal store was relatively large. This setting is typically characterized by a relatively low number of employees in relation to the number of customers, so the impact of employee proactivity should be examined also in other retail settings. Moreover, the store in the present studies generated relatively high satisfaction scores for the participants (regardless if they were subject to employee proactivity or not), thus indicating high overall store performance. However, this may produce a halo effect in the sense that the overall store evaluation can influence evaluations of specific store attributes (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Wirtz and Bateson,

1995; Wu and Petroshius, 1987). Presumably, given a halo effect, overall store evaluations may create leniency in customers' views of employee proactivity (i.e., relatively little employee effort may be enough for employee behavior to be considered proactive). Therefore, further research should examine the effects of employee proactivity in stores with lower overall satisfaction levels.

It should also be noted that the present studies comprised a traditional brick and mortar context. Changes, however, are underway with respect to face-to-face interactions between the employee and the customer in retail and service environments. The perhaps most salient aspect is Internet-based shopping. Already some 15 years ago, it was predicted to alter the retailing landscape as fundamentally as the department store, the mail-order firm, and the discount department store had done (Christensen and Tedlow, 2000). This early optimism regarding an internet shopping revolution has indeed prevailed; such shopping is recognized as growing exponentially (Kim et al., 2012) and as a significant part of the global economy (Cho, 2014). Obviously, however, Internet shopping produces limited opportunities for the customer to deal with employees on a face-to-face basis (Grewal et al., 2002). Yet proactivity can be signaled also in an online environment, and this aspects calls for further studies of how it can be done and what its influence is on customer satisfaction. Additional moderating variables that call for attention are various individual customer characteristics. For example, strong social shopping motives (Tauber, 1972) are likely to strengthen the impact of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction, while a dominant utilitarian shopping motivation (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006) may attenuate the impact.

Finally, the present studies examined the effect of employee proactivity on customer satisfaction. Employee proactivity, however, may influence several in-store behaviors, such as the time spent in the store, the number of departments visited, the share of unplanned purchases, and the total amount of money spent in the store. Further research is clearly needed to explore the possibility of such effects.

Appendix A

See Table A1 and A2.

Table A1
Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for the variables in Study 1.

		Mean	S.D.	1	2
1.	Employee proactivity	1.21	0.40		
2.	Perceived employee performance	8.44	1.58	0.26	
3.	Customer satisfaction	8.10	1.35	0.15	0.68

Table A2
Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for the variables in Study 2.

		Mean	S.D.	1	2	3
1.	Employee proactivity	1.54	0.50			
2.	Perceived employee effort	4.24	3.37	0.36		
3.	Perceived employee performance	9.29	1.08	0.09	0.17	
4.	Customer satisfaction	8.43	1.59	0.20	0.12	0.24

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