



# Bad behavior and conflict in retailing spaces: Nine suggestions to ease tensions

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**Abstract** This article builds on years of work studying territoriality and conflict issues between customers and employees in retail and service settings. The key contribution of this research is to illustrate the bad behaviors and conflicts that take place in retail spaces between customers, between customers and employees, and between employees. Using multi-methods of data collection—critical incident technique, interviews, mystery shoppers, and surveys—the authors outline these bad behaviors and conflicts for managers and offer nine solutions to help retailers handle these behaviors and conflict in retail spaces.

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*The human failing I would most like to correct is aggression. It may have had survival advantage in caveman days, to get more food, territory or partner with whom to reproduce, but now it threatens to destroy us all.*

— Stephen Hawking (Winter, 2015)

*Time and space—time to be alone, space to move about—these may well become the great scarcities of tomorrow.*

— Edwin Way Teale (1956)

## 1. Conflict in the retail environment

As the opening quotes from Stephen Hawking and Edwin Way Teale suggest, aggressive tendencies and a lack of space/privacy are issues we face in present time. This article explores conflict and bad behavior arising from issues such as these in a retail environment. Consider the following scenario:

Maria walks into a grocery store to buy cake mix for a birthday cake she plans to make that evening. She is in a hurry because she must soon pick up her son from school. She quickly walks to the baking supplies aisle and sees that her path is blocked by two women, their carts, and their cavorting children. Maria walks up the adjacent aisle and back down the baking

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aisle only to find an employee stocking the cake mix area. Maria maneuvers around the employee, who seems in no hurry to get out of her way. Sensing that the employee knows what she's after but is not willing to help by moving, Maria crossly asks him to move the cart and products out of her way so she can get the cake mix and pick up her child on time. As she reaches for her cake mix, the employee hands her a different box and says: "Oh, no. You should try *this* cake mix. My wife uses it and she makes the best cakes." Maria gets flushed. She doesn't want that cake mix. She has always used Betty Crocker. Her grandmother used Betty Crocker. Maria tells the employee thanks, but she'd rather stick with her brand. The employee persists by telling Maria about the last cake his wife made for his birthday using 'his' brand and how moist and delicious the cake was. Maria, in a hurry and not wanting to listen to the employee's personal stories, grabs both boxes and leaves the aisle. She dumps the unwanted box at the endcap and rushes to the checkout to stand third in line.

While Maria waits, a woman with a young child gets in line behind her. The child rams his mother's cart into the back of Maria's heels. Maria whirls around to see the woman on her phone, with no regard to Maria's space or the child invading it as he pulls back the cart for round two. As she moves up to next in line, the person in front of her is taking forever and Maria fears she might be late in picking up her son. To Maria's relief, another cash register opens. As next in line, Maria quickly tries to move over, but the cashier waves the woman and child to come be served. Maria is frustrated; she had been waiting longer! Realizing both her patience and time have run out, Maria nestles the cake mix in between some Reese's Cups and Snickers on the candy impulse-buy rack and leaves the store to go pick up her son. She exits, annoyed and frustrated—and without what she originally came for.

As she drives away, Maria wonders how a trip to the store for a single box of cake mix could be such a hassle. Didn't she have the right to the store space over the employee who was stocking the shelves? Didn't the employee know not to push a product or brand onto a customer when the customer didn't ask for an opinion? Weren't there some kind of social norms for checkout areas regarding first

come, first served line cues and personal space?

Maria's story is a common occurrence for many of us. Retail managers need to recognize these conflicts and implement solutions to ease resulting tensions. Many bad behaviors and conflicts occur over territory issues. An employee's territory—including intellectual territory (i.e., area of expertise)—extends beyond his personal space. Likewise, the shopper's territory, and the items she has currently selected, is her personal space. While people agree the territories are different, sometimes the two territories cross on the floor and turf wars and conflicts begin. Our initial research on territoriality focused on closing time issues from customers', employees', and managers' perspectives. Our findings on territoriality around closing time are reported elsewhere (Ashley & Noble, 2014; Noble, Esmark, & Ashley, 2015). However, we found in our research that territorial conflicts and bad behaviors extend to more domains, well beyond just closing time issues. This broader view of conflict and bad behavior between customers and employees is presented here with nine solutions to ease tensions.

We employed a multitude of methodologies over the last several years to understand different facets of conflict and bad behavior in retail settings. These methods included critical incident technique interviews with customers and employees of various retailers; mystery shoppers in stores to identify tensions, conflicts, and outcomes; and surveys of customers. Our findings highlight the conflict and bad behaviors from customers and employees that can arise when shopping. In the next sections we will illustrate these sources of conflict and bad behavior in retail settings, describe the three areas of conflict, and offer nine solutions to ease tension in these situations.

## 2. Sources of bad behavior and conflict: A brief literature review

Dysfunctional employees and customers can create conflict that impacts other customers, employees, and store sales. A dysfunctional customer acts either on purpose or on accident in a way that disrupts typical function (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). These dysfunctional customers can be loud, selfish, inebriated, and abusive. They can cause conflict with other customers and employees, but can also turn to aggression or violence, which presents serious problems for the retailer. Harris and Reynolds (2003) found that dysfunctional

customers can either impact other customers' behavior (positively or negatively) or influence their consumption experience. Additionally, dysfunctional customers can affect employees in ways that include psychological, emotional, behavioral, and physical consequences. Repeat customers who have behaved badly in the past or had conflict with an employee can cause stress to employees who see that patron again. Imagine the cashier who was recently yelled at by a customer for not accepting an expired coupon, who now sees the same customer come in during off-peak hours while the cashier is manning the only lane open. The situation is now primed for future conflict that could cost the store financially (Harris & Reynolds, 2003).

Employees can also be dysfunctional and cause conflict. These employees intentionally or unintentionally spoil the consumption experience of the customer (Patterson & Baron, 2010) by being rude, sabotaging the company's efforts (e.g., putting up incorrect prices), wasting time, or withholding effort (e.g., not doing their assigned work in a reasonable amount of time; Penney, Hunter, & Perry, 2011). Similar to dysfunctional customer behavior having a domino effect on other customers, misbehaving employees can cause deviant behavior in customers (Yi & Gong, 2008) and other employees. In addition, employees serve as the face of the store (Martineau, 1958), and a dysfunctional employee has detrimental effects upon her store's image.

Conflict can also arise from confusion. Frontline employees can receive from customers requests that fall in the grey area: those that are not completely compliant with company policy, but not completely unacceptable either. In these situations, an employee will follow script theory and either comply with an agreeable customer's request or deny an aggressive customer his (Wang, Beatty, & Liu, 2012). Furthermore, this confusion can arise when customers and employees are unsure of store markings (e.g., what space is designated for whom), incorrect pricing, and other retail atmospheric and environmental factors (Schweizer, Kotouc, & Wagner, 2006). Unclear instructions on shopper and employee expectations lead to confusion, which can result in deviant actions or conflict.

Other factors can create conflict, too. Consider competition, as evident in Black Friday sales. Shoppers trample each other in an effort to get limited products for the best prices. Lennon, Johnson, and Lee (2011) found that shoppers who believed they put forth effort to plan and shop on their Black Friday excursions were more likely to perform dysfunctional customer acts and create conflict. In general, shoppers who think they spend more time and effort planning shopping trips are more likely to create

conflict, perhaps because they see stores and the products inside as 'their territory' due to their perceived efforts.

Territorial conflicts are also sources of bad behaviors, both from customers and employees (Ashley & Noble, 2014; Noble et al., 2015). Customers of a store believe they have rights in a territorial area they can use, such as their personal space in a retail aisle, the fitting room, their shopping cart, and their place in line. Their territory even includes items they are in the process of selecting to buy and areas they currently occupy. Employee territory is more often described as a specific area or department the employee is responsible for and given responsibilities in. An employee's territory can include equipment she is trained to handle, her area of expertise (i.e., intellectual territory), and rights to customers in a specific area of the store—especially when employees work off commission. Employee territory extends beyond her current physical space and into employee-only areas (e.g., the break room, behind cash register or counter, office areas, stock rooms). Employee territory can be claimed well beyond the employee's limits of personal space whereas customer territory is always within the customer's immediate reach.

### 3. The three areas of bad behavior and conflict

Our research revealed that the battles and conflicts that take place in retail spaces can be organized into three areas: those that occur between customers and employees (customer-to-employee), those that occur between customers (customer-to-customer), and those that occur between employees (employee-to-employee). A review of behaviors identified in each area is summarized below, followed by suggestions to ease tensions.

#### 3.1. Customer-to-Employee

Customers do not like being told what they can't do by an employee. In fact, being told what they cannot do causes shoppers to question the competency of the employees hired by the store, which causes conflict and bad behavior displays from both customers and employees. Consider the following examples:

I was at the store shucking corn that I was going to buy, and an employee came up to me and shouted that I wasn't supposed to do that. To me, it's a pretty normal behavior: I don't want a bunch of corn husks littering up my place, and I

don't want to buy any messed up ears of corn. But even if the store prohibits it, it's not some stock clerk's job to get in my face and threaten me. I just kept on doing what I was doing, since I doubted he'd have the nerve to physically restrain me from shucking corn. It could have been prevented by the store hiring competent people. (Mark)

I was in a store and there was an area behind an oddly placed register. I wanted to see those clothes so I walked behind the register. I was rudely told by the employee that I couldn't go there. I shot back: "Then why have clothes there?" It could have been made better had the employee known that I was in fact able to walk around to view the clothes. (Penelope)

One of the most common complaints from shoppers about employees revolved around the employee in a sales role. Many shoppers felt hounded when a salesperson just wouldn't leave them alone, and often reacted badly to these persistent sales attempts. Several quotes by shoppers help illustrate:

I think that customers also need to be afforded some space. I was recently at a store and was being hounded by one of the salesmen. I know they work on commission and need to make sales, but he was following me everywhere asking if I needed help. Eventually I got annoyed and rudely told him I wasn't planning on buying anything. (Bob)

My personal view is that an employee has enough space to ask a customer if they need assistance, and if so, to help the customer in regard to the request by offering information that addresses specifically what the customer has asked. Sales pitches about different or unrelated items are a violation of this. I do not like these types of sales pitches and will let the employees know this if need be. (Cameron)

Although helpful, the employee figured I didn't know much about vintage keyboards and started to argue with me. I explained that I had some experience with them, and that I knew what I was talking about, but the employee felt the need to 'correct' me on certain topics. I had asked a few simple questions, and apparently I invaded the employee's 'specialty' and needed to be re-educated. In the end, I told him thanks for the information and that I'd reconsider, and ended up leaving the store empty-handed. (Kelly)

Other tensions customers mentioned about employees dealt with space and blocking issues. Customers were not very tolerant of an employee blocking their path, even if the employee was involved in a work-related task such as stocking the shelves or cleaning the dressing rooms. Customers would prefer that employees stock shelves after hours or clean when it doesn't interfere with their shopping; however, that is not always the most profitable solution for the store. Consider Miranda, who was trying to shop:

The struggle was with an employee that was putting merchandise on shelves. I was trying to look for a particular product and this employee was in my way, again and again. It was pretty irritating. He was just clueless and continuously in my way. Very annoying!

While customers complain about employees being in their way or telling them what they can't do, the customer-employee conflict isn't a one-way street. Employees feel tensions from customers, too. Employees reported wanting their personal space respected by customers and felt that customers sometimes got too close, especially when they came around the counter to point out an item. Employees reported experiencing bad behaviors from customers when they tried to get away with a better deal than what was actually available. This included shoppers yelling at them for not accepting a coupon or switching tags on items to try and pay a cheaper price. The following quotes illustrate bad customer behavior to an employee regarding space and coupon issues:

I was working as a cashier at a grocery store and a customer was getting uncomfortably close to me behind the register. I felt like my space was being invaded. I asked her to move away from the register and she started yelling at me that she could do whatever she wanted! (Carlee)

There was a situation where a shopper held me responsible because our store did not accept some sort of mall coupons. The woman would not stop yelling. I felt harassed. (Jackie)

Bad customer behavior can often leave the employee feeling like the shopper is cheating him and the store. The employee then feels responsibility to protect the store and himself from such manipulations. One of the major invasions of this kind reported by employees was sweethearting (Brady, Voorhees, & Brusco, 2012). In sweethearting, friends or relatives of the employee enter the store expecting freebies or use of the employee's



discount, or ask the employee to hide items they can buy later on sale. Consider the following quotes from employees:

My friends came into the store to visit me but ended up trying on a bunch of clothes and made a mess in the fitting room, which was pretty inconsiderate. They then picked out only one or two things and insisted that I check them out so they could use my discount, or see if I could give them any 'hidden' discounts. It was pretty annoying. (Marco)

Family members often ask for a discount. I always explain to them that I can't do that because it could get me fired. That reason is generally sufficient and they don't push. One family member didn't [accept it] though, and kept pushing. They were saying things like: "How will they know?" They were very insistent. I told them no, and walked away from the situation. The person doesn't speak to me anymore. (Charlotte)

Sweethearting can cause significant revenue and profit loss. Employees have reported the friend or family member getting mad, starting a fight, or making the employee feel weird about freebies and discounts. One employee said a friend even stole right in front of her and winked on the way out.

Other conflicts from the employee perspective result when the employee is just trying to do his job, such as attempting to push a pallet through a crowded store with limited space. Often, customers are in the way and refuse to move. Employees reported they didn't feel there was much they could do to gain access to an area already claimed by a shopper except politely ask the customer to move. Many times, though, the customer won't move until she has finished her task at hand. The shopper feels it is her right to be there. Employees reported frustration with such noncompliance from customers; they cannot do their job efficiently if they can't gain access to a certain area. This may not be an issue during slow store hours, but consider the employee who can't stock empty shelves during peak times or sales events. The inability of an employee to do certain tasks can result in stock-outs and lost sales for the store. Plus, it leaves more work for the employee to do later.

### 3.2. Customer-to-Customer

The biggest conflicts that arise between customers occur in waiting lines. Here, customers feel crowded and that their space is invaded by others who push or

bump them, cut in line, or reach for items on adjacent shelves. Psychological research has shown that when people get too physically close, one person is likely to leave and concede the territory to the other. As demonstrated in the service literature (e.g., Price, Arnould, & Tierney, 1995), close physical proximity can be a positive as in the case of a dental hygienist or a surgical nurse. Most retail shopping experiences are not extended, affectively driven service encounters, however; therefore, close proximity and other boundary infringements can get personal and problematic. Consider the following stories:

This incident happened a couple of months back at a local supermarket. It was a Sunday evening and the shop was full. The queues were long and I was standing in the queue. I saw a middle-aged woman slowly sneak into the line. I got extremely annoyed and started [verbally] abusing the shopper. We had heated exchanges for about 2–3 minutes. Finally, the store manager sorted out the issue. (Cindy)

Recently I was going to go check out an item and a person blatantly cut me in line. What happened was their kid grabbed something and ran in front of me, even though I was already waiting, and the person then went to go get the kid and pay for the stuff she was carrying. She didn't even apologize. (Alan)

I was in the checkout line and one woman was ahead of me. The store didn't have one of those separators to signal to the cashier when the items switch over to the next customer. So I waited until most of the woman's items were purchased and left a lot of room between her last item and my first item. Then I loaded my items on the conveyor belt and when her last item was rung up, my items automatically got moved to within the cashier's hand range. I know the cashier knew those items were mine. He's been doing this for a while, I'm sure, and he knows that a huge gap between items means those are mine. But the lady touched my items to move them back to ensure the cashier would know those items weren't hers. I don't know why, but it [ticked] me off. I don't want her touching my stuff. I've not even paid for it yet, but it's my stuff and I don't want someone else touching and moving it. (Terra)

As these examples illustrate, shoppers get anxious in checkout lines about being cut in on, another shopper touching or stealing their items, or—the

worst—another register opening up and the last person in line getting to it first. Consider the following example:

I was standing in line and I seemed to have the slowest checkout person possible. I was in a hurry and was getting impatient. Another lane opened and I quickly tried to move over to it, but the person behind me got there first. I told this man that I had been there longer and was in a hurry, but he ignored me and continued to put his stuff on the conveyor belt. I wanted to punch him for ignoring me, but I ended up giving him an earful instead. (David)

Another area of conflict arose over space issues. At first, customers appear to play nicely with one another. Usually, when a shopper notices an area she wants to be in is already occupied, her first reaction is to avoid the aisle or area. A shopper will go another route to get to what she needs, shop for something else and come back later, or wait patiently. However, if the shopper has to wait too long, she can get frustrated, leave the store, or get rude with the other shopper. Rose summed it up nicely:

I'll go around and collect the few other things and save that for last. If I come back and those folks are still there, in as rude of a tone I can get by with I'll say "excuse me" and make my way to the item in question. I don't care if the people get upset; they are strangers to me and I'll never see them again.

Customers reported taking an animalistic approach to claiming territory from other customers by making themselves as big as possible with their elbows out and placing their personal belongings around them to claim an area. They will stand their ground and not move while taking part in staring contests to intimidate the other shopper into leaving the area. In our research, the most popular tactic for claiming territory entailed using a shopping cart as a barrier or obstacle between the other shopper and well-claimed space.

One of the more common blocking issues we saw occurred in coffee shops and restaurants, where customers occupied tables for extended periods of time. This was particularly annoying and problematic during peak hours. Other customers could not obtain a place to sit and employees realized lost sales from individuals who left the establishment due to limited seating.

When territory is already claimed and it's not given up, customers will wait for a second or look at other items, but then can get rude and retaliate; more timid shoppers just won't get what they need. The

end result is dissatisfied customers and less purchases made. In extreme cases, territory struggles led to physical fights. Understanding the frustrations customers encounter regarding space while shopping is important so managers can find ways to fix the problem and create a more pleasurable shopping experience. After all, happy customers buy more.

### 3.3. Employee-to-Employee

Employees feel conflict and display bad behaviors toward each other, too, particularly regarding sales and job promotions. Many employees complain about going to help a customer find something and later discovering that another employee has sold her the item. This is particularly detrimental when employees work off commission or get bonuses for selling additional protection plans or signing up shoppers for company credit cards. When sales wars occur before a transaction is made, the battle can lead to lost sales. Consider Shaun, who felt his sales territory was being invaded:

I worked as a sales executive for a hardware manufacturing firm. I was attempting to sell a new networking product for a client. During the demonstration the client mentioned to me that another executive from my firm had approached him with a similar product. I said it was impossible because I was responsible for that territory. He even gave me the other guy's phone number. I later figured out that he was a part-time sales executive hired by my firm. His sales were affecting my monthly targets. I was so angry and complained to my manager.

Shaun's situation caused high emotions and a complaint to his manager. These situations—where one employee takes another's sale—usually result in negative emotions and less teamwork between the employees involved, and can lead to dysfunctional employee acts. If an employee feels he has been cheated out of commission by a non-cooperating fellow employee, the original employee may retaliate in ways against the company, especially if he feels a manager was alerted to the problem and did not fix it. Similar emotions can arise from available promotions, as outlined by the following:

We both wanted to apply for a new job [and that caused struggle.] The job was one that I would have naturally moved up to and the new person was trying for it out of the blue. There was an understanding that I would move up and the new competition changed that. We were never very civil to each other after that. (Stefani)

A co-worker and I were both up for a promotion. Things became a little tense between us. We both wanted the job. We agreed to work together and just do our jobs. Things became better after that, until I was chosen for the promotion. (Nina)

Both Stefani and Nina felt conflict arise when they applied for a promotion. Similar to stolen sales, this issue causes negative emotions and less teamwork between the employees involved, and can lead to dysfunctional employee acts. The employee who feels a promotion belongs to him but doesn't get it will sometimes retaliate against the company in a way so as to create what he feels is justice.

Employees can also encounter conflict through assigned spaces. While some employees don't mind another employee working in their assigned section, others find it frustrating. Since many staff members are responsible for their work stations or sections, not all are comfortable with having other employees in their areas. Consider Parker, who described several space conflicts:

At my last job we would work in stations. It was basically understood that my station was my space for the day, and no one else was meant to be using that space. From time to time there would be issues when someone would use someone else's counter or try to make use of their stocked product, and it would result in spats. Usually we'd end the problem with a stern: "Hey, stop stealing my stuff, dude."

Parker described conflict resulting in small arguments from borrowed space. Many retail employees have sections of a store they are responsible for tidying before closing. While some don't mind receiving help, others want to tackle the job single-handedly, as they and they alone are held responsible for the results. Parker also touched on employees borrowing stocked products from another employee's station. While the goods for sale do not belong to any one employee, the individual who stocked the products to his section for later use feels a sense of entitlement to them as his own. As with the sales commission and promotion conflicts, these conflicts between employees can cause negative emotions and less teamwork. An employee might retaliate against another employee if the conflict is allowed to go on long enough. Because full-time employees spend much of their week on the job, it is important to recognize that conflicts and territorial disputes can occur between employees, as they feel a sense of ownership through their job, assigned space, and job tasks.

## 4. Nine solutions to ease tensions caused by bad behavior and conflict

### 4.1. Wider and shorter aisles

One of the easiest ways to ensure that customers and employees do not block each other entails designing and executing wider and shorter aisles. Aisles need to be wide enough for two people—plus carts, if your store has them—to move through without bumping. A break in the middle of the aisle is also strategic so that patrons don't have to walk the entire length of the aisle to enter or exit. A long aisle split in two has additional benefits: a middle, perpendicular aisle can now showcase extra items and creates doubled prime real estate endcaps. Walgreens provides an excellent design example of a longer aisle split in half with a perpendicular aisle in the middle.

Products should only be placed where customers can get to them, with the exception of items that need to be locked up or placed behind counters for theft/security reasons. Shoppers shouldn't have to go where they aren't allowed to view merchandise. To ensure that employee spaces stay customer-free, these areas should be completely enclosed to prohibit customer entry, and signs should be installed clearly telling customers where they are not allowed to go. As confusion can lead to conflict, it is important that both customers and employees alike know their roles and territory through clear signage and a store layout that allows for easy shopping.

### 4.2. Power aisle

A power aisle is a great store addition that enables shoppers to quickly pick up staple items. In a power aisle, a small number of items (e.g., milk, bread, toilet paper) are displayed in large quantities. Customers are not faced with overwhelming product choices, can easily find their most-needed items (Smith & Burns, 1996), and can make a quicker selection and thus have less time to block other shoppers. Likewise, individuals who need to run in and grab something on a tight schedule can more easily do so without fear of being blocked. A power aisle placed at the left, right, or front of a store means more room for these quick shopping trips and less likelihood of customer frustration at not being able to rapidly procure staple items. Moreover, as quick shoppers utilize the power aisle, they are less likely to block and create conflict for other consumers who are involved in more in-depth shopping. Finally, the power aisle also serves as a price and quality anchor for the remainder of the store.

### 4.3. 'Customer Rules' sign

Announcements and signage can be useful in reminding customers to be polite and respect others' personal space and privacy. A store may implement reminder announcements during peak hours or display a 'Customer Rules' sign in high traffic areas. Oftentimes when people are reminded to be nice, respectful, patient, helpful, and courteous, they will behave more in that manner than if they otherwise did not see a cue. For example, research reports that people are less likely to cheat after signing an honor code and less likely to steal or lie after reading the Ten Commandments (Ariely, 2008).

Stores can utilize these signs not only at the entrance but also throughout, and also on shopping carts. For example, a shopping cart handle reminding customers to be polite and respectful, or thanking them for being courteous to others, could be the motivation they need to not fall into dysfunctional customer acts. While marketing communications are rampant in-store, managers need to consider how they will train and motivate their customers to be well-behaving shoppers, as discussed further in Section 4.8. (Frei & Morriss, 2012).

### 4.4. Line cue management and procedures

Most customers hate the experience of waiting in lines; therefore, stores should—to the best of their ability—alleviate the anxiety shoppers feel when checking out. Line cues need to be clearly marked with signs, shelving, or other barriers. Almost nothing makes a customer more annoyed than if she feels someone has cut in front of her. As a potential solution, stores could have only one entry to the checkout registers with shelf space on either side such that cutting is impossible; the person at the front of the main line goes to the next available cashier. In this practice, the store would train employees to only take people from the front of the line, not the last person—unless the person in front already has his items on the conveyor belt—when a new lane opens up.

Where privacy might be more desired (e.g., a pharmacy), the dividers between lanes could be built taller so that other customers could not see or touch one's items. A solid mini-wall between one cashier station and another would help privacy at checkouts, much like the setup at a bank. If a store uses carts, the carts should have some privacy considerations so they can't be seen through too readily (e.g., Target's carts).

### 4.5. Peak time tactics

During peak times, employees in eateries can pass out boxes when they think patrons are finished to encourage them to free up tables for waiting customers. This is particularly applicable in service settings like pizza restaurants where customers use the table to eat but spend additional time in the restaurant playing games. It is also applicable in coffee shops, where patrons occupy tables for extended periods of time.

Often in coffee shops, customers place backpacks or jackets on adjacent seats to save them for friends, or camp out for hours using the free Wi-Fi but purchase little throughout their stay. Shops can employ a sign turned on during peak times suggesting that patrons consider others who need a seat for a brief period of time. The key here is an illuminated sign that is used sparingly, only during times of high-demand to let customers know when claimed space needs to be shared or abandoned. Additionally, Wi-Fi can be limited during peak hours to 30 minutes so customers can't occupy a needed seat while others are waiting. One manager even told us using different furniture was helpful; he used furniture that wasn't as inviting so customers didn't stay quite as long. Another suggestion was to have a lounge area for longer-staying patrons to use while quicker customers can grab a seat at a table.

### 4.6. Family and Friend Day discounts

To combat employees giving freebies to friends or relatives, companies should screen employees for ethical values and the need for social acceptance (Brady et al., 2012). Stores can hold family and friend discount days, during which employees don't have to tell their friends "no" or feel uncomfortable letting family use their discount. Also consider letting employees give a discount to family members, but at a lower rate than the employee discount.

### 4.7. Train and screen employees

Stores can reduce conflict and territorial issues by training and screening their employees. Using a screener to hire employees who are highly conscientious and emotionally stable reduces the likelihood of hiring a deviant employee who won't achieve work goals (Penney et al., 2011). Managers can train employees to follow policy (or implement a new policy when necessary), to respect customers' roles, and how to reduce conflict should it arise. Employees might need specific training regarding how to react to a dysfunctional customer or deviant



employee. These types of conflicts can lead to aggressive acts that could potentially physically harm the employee or another customer, and thus require additional, specialized training on the safest way to resolve the conflict.

#### 4.8. Train and screen customers

While managers are used to training employees to act a certain way, managers can also reduce conflict by training customers. Consider Sam's Club and Aldi, where customers empty their carts onto the check-out counter and another empty cart sits at the end of the counter to load. If a customer doesn't bring a cart to the counter, however, he cannot take the empty one at the end. How do stores train their customers to follow these invisible scripts and behave? [Frei and Morriss \(2012\)](#) suggest that as customers increasingly start playing the role of employee, stores need to find a way to manage and motivate customers like they do employees. Store managers should consider what kind of customer they are tracking and use their marketing communications to screen for badly behaving customers.

Frei and Morriss use Starbucks as an example of how to train customers. When Starbucks first opened, it had problems moving customers quickly through the line as these individuals weren't used to the Starbucks vocabulary. As a solution, Starbucks trained its customers by publicly correcting them when they ordered using the wrong terminology. The barista would shout the correct order in Starbucks lingo for all to hear, and customers thus learned how to order their coffee the Starbucks way ([Frei & Morriss, 2012](#)). Aldi and Sam's Club have a similar customer training method. At these stores, if you don't bring a cart to the counter or have bags to carry your purchases in, you will walk out holding your items in hand and be unlikely to make the same mistakes again.

Stores can also use other methods of communication to train customers. Just as Starbucks uses verbal correction to train its customers, stores can utilize visual cues to train their shoppers. For example, a line down the middle of a retail aisle would alert customers as to when they are blocking or taking up more than their fair share of space. Employees can be trained to politely ask shoppers to move out of the way if they are unintentionally blocking another customer who is too passive to say "Excuse me." Greeters or cashiers can also extend a sincere "Thank you for being a conscientious shopper" to customers as they enter or check out, to reinforce the importance of behaving while in the store.

#### 4.9. Clear sales boundaries or split commissions

Employees' number one territorial issue with other employees is stolen sales. When stores use commission to encourage employees to make sales, employees should be trained on what sections they are responsible for in order to reduce potential conflict. Employees should also be allowed to split or share a sale if more than one interacted with the customer. When bonuses are offered to employees for add-ons such as protection plans and credit cards, managers shouldn't pit employees against each other but instead have them work as a team toward one common goal. Then employees can share a reward—even at different proportions—and they are less likely to feel the need to sneak a sale under their own name.

### 5. Conclusion

This article presented three areas of conflict and bad behavior that arise in retail environments: between customers, between customers and employees, and between employees. Nine solutions were presented to illustrate tactics stores can implement to ease tensions from bad behaviors and conflict in these retail settings. If implemented, these tactics should help customers feel less anxiety and have a more enjoyable shopping experience. Similarly, employees should be able to provide better service to customers and be more likely to get their job done as a result of these tactics.

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