Cooks Make Tastier Food When They Can See Their Customers

by Ryan W. Buell, Tami Kim, and Chia-Jung Tsay
DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH
COOKS MAKE TASTIER FOOD WHEN THEY CAN SEE THEIR CUSTOMERS

The research: Ryan W. Buell, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School; Tami Kim, a doctoral student at HBS; and Chia-Jung Tsay, an assistant professor at University College London, set up four scenarios in a real cafeteria for two weeks. In the first, diners and cooks couldn’t view one another; in the second, the diners could see the cooks; in the third, the cooks could see the diners; and in the fourth, both the diners and the cooks were visible to one another. The researchers timed the preparation and conducted surveys about the service and food. The results showed that when the cooks could see their patrons, the food quality got higher ratings.

The challenge: Does the mere sight of a customer motivate you to do your job better? Defend your research.

Buell: The results were pretty compelling: Customer satisfaction with the food shot up 10% when the cooks could see the customers, even though the customers couldn’t see the cooks. In the opposite situation, there was no improvement in satisfaction from the baseline condition in which neither group could see the other. But even more striking, when customers and cooks both could see one another, satisfaction went up 17.3%, and service was 13.2% faster. Transparency between customers and providers seems to really improve service.

Buell: Why do you think that improved the perception of quality?

Buell: We’ve learned that seeing the customer can make employees feel more appreciated, more satisfied with their jobs, and more willing to exert effort. It’s important to note that it wasn’t just the perception of quality that improved—the food objectively got better. During the experiment we had an observer in the kitchen taking notes and timing service. Normally, chefs would make eggs on the grill in advance, adding them to plates as needed and often overcooking them. When we turned on the screens and the chefs saw the customers, they started making eggs to order more often.

Kim: How did you rig it so that they could see one another?

Kim: We used iPads and set up a videoconference between the dining area and the kitchen. There was no sound and no interaction, but people on both sides could see each other.

Tsay: Why do you think that improved the perception of quality?

Tsay: We also tested these effects on a range of populations, from chefs to communities in remote parts of the world. We consistently found that transparency created value.

Maybe seeing the customers just raises the anxiety of the chefs, and they feel they have to do better because they’re being watched?

Kim: We considered whether transparency could have unintended costs. We found that reciprocity plays a much bigger role than stress or accountability. This is more about gratitude—which is a powerful force. Cooks constantly said how much they loved seeing their customers. Many wanted to keep the iPad setup. One said, “When the customers can see the work, they appreciate it, and it makes me want to improve.”

Buell: Being appreciated makes work meaningful. People feel what they do matters. Human connections seem to trigger that.

Tsay: We did follow-up experiments in which chefs and customers watched videos of service interactions. For customers, seeing the chefs’ work increased their perceptions of effort and improved their opinions of the service. But it didn’t matter to the chefs if the customers watched them make the meal. Just seeing the customers is what motivated them to do better.

So, customers do want to see inside the sausage factory?

Buell: Probably not. Sandwich making is an appealing process. We’ve learned that the process has to be effective and the outcome has to be favorable for the benefits of transparency to accrue. But in such settings transparency can change one’s whole outlook on a service. In another study we did, customers preordered a sandwich and then either waited to pick it up in view of the station where food was prepared or bypassed...
the line and picked it up without waiting. The sandwiches weren't any different, but customers who waited in line rated the service higher. Think about that: People who observed the chef thought the service was better despite the line, because they could see the effort being made.

The output in knowledge work isn't as simple or as delicious as a sandwich. Can this work in an office or with more-complex transactions?

**Kim:** There are many examples in realms where effort is hidden from customers. Decisions in health care. Prep work in education and online learning. Our findings suggest that it's not just about the final output but about what goes into it.

**Buell:** Think about an office job where your head is down and you're just processing paperwork all the time and are separated from the customer. If suddenly the beneficiary of your labor is visible to you, it could change how you feel about the work.

**So if I had seen someone reading a Defend Your Research column before this interview, it would be a better interview?**

**Tsay:** Possibly—if you'd seen that they appreciated your work.

**The visual access here included eye contact. What if that's the connection at work?**

**Maybe I have to have that?**

**Buell:** It doesn't seem to be about eye contact. In earlier research, Michael Norton and I found that when websites reveal the work they're doing, customers appreciate and value their service more.

**Kim:** It may extend beyond service. What about manufacturing transparency? What if you could watch your car being made? Would it change how you felt about the company? Would it change how you took care of the car? Would you get into fewer accidents? Buy more insurance? These are all questions we're asking.

**Tsay:** What's exciting is that these are often subtle alterations. It's not expensive or difficult to create transparency between consumers and producers. Just by opening up the work environment, you could improve value and quality. Transparency becomes a low-cost strategic advantage.

**But maybe consumers would get used to it? This was a two-week study. What if after three months, cooks and diners just started tuning it out?**

**Buell:** We'll need to do more work to know for sure. If you're the employee, seeing the customer may fundamentally change the way you look at your job and how you perform it daily. You'll cook more eggs to order, for example. And if you're a customer, seeing the person helping you may recast your view of the exchange. This work highlights the humanity of interactions, of service. There's something refreshingly human about the idea that just seeing each other can make us more appreciative and lead to objectively better outcomes.

**Appreciation makes work meaningful. People feel what they do matters.**