



# CUSTOMER SERVICE HIRING: ARE RUDE CUSTOMERS WORSE THAN IRATE ONES?

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Turnover is a concern for all businesses, but companies in the service and hospitality industries face unique obstacles in retaining employees. Not only is the cost of recruiting, hiring, and onboarding new employees significant, but turnover disrupts the stability of operations, and can damage the consistency and quality of customer service.

While serving others is meaningful work, the often unpredictable emotional demands that frontline service employees must manage are a significant driver of turnover. Frontline employees serve everyone from loyal brand advocates to irate customers. If we know what customer encounters are most stressful and linked to burnout and turnover, then we can seek to understand the qualities of people who thrive in those situations.

From your own experience, which encounters do you believe are most stressful – and linked to turnover?

- #1 Encounters involving openly **upset and hostile** customers, or
- #2 Encounters with **impolite or rude** customers. For example, customers who do not say please or thank you, take cell phone calls or text, or speak in ways that could be perceived as aggressive or accusatory (an example might be a customer who frequently starts sentences with “You...”).

Researchers find impolite and rude customers are a bigger cause of stress and turnover than upset and hostile customers.



## CUSTOMER INCIVILITY

Customer incivility is the term organizational researchers use to describe these lower-intensity rude behaviors which violate norms for mutual respect and courtesy. Incivility is damaging in part because of its ambiguous intent – is the customer’s intent to show disrespect? While angry customers are definitely stressful, their clear behavior and emotion makes it easier to name and respond appropriately. Rude encounters are more difficult to interpret and determine how to best serve the customer. What was the intent behind that, “You should...” comment by the customer – was he doubting my ability to do my job?

Slowly over time, incivility can “spiral” out of control. Employees can respond to customers with uncivil behavior of their own (or more frequently fellow employees) creating a spiral of incivility. These spirals can spread to include even more employees, and escalate from rudeness to overtly hostile and aggressive acts such as verbal aggression or theft. These negative spirals are more likely to occur with employees who lack the qualities needed to thrive in a service role, or lack the preparation and resources needed to meet customer expectations.

## BUILDING RESILIENT TEAMS

Building teams who can thrive in the face of difficult customer encounters is possible by screening for key qualities during the [hiring process](#). One way to measure these qualities is with [pre-employment assessments](#) which leverage psychology and data to identify candidates with the potential to meet the expectations of the job. Here are three key qualities to consider including in pre-employment assessments for customer service roles:



## #1. RESILIENCE

Calvin Coolidge said persistence, “has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.” The ability to recover quickly from a difficult situation, learn from it, and press on is crucial to success in customer service roles. Hiring assessments can help you determine if a candidate shows a productive response to failure. Resilience is linked to feeling in control and taking ownership of reaching a successful outcome. The sample assessment questions below, as part of a large scale measuring accountability, will identify candidates who will learn and grow following difficult customer encounters.

011

I view problems I encounter at work as “personal challenges” I can overcome.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Slightly Disagree

Slightly Agree

Agree

Strongly Agree

012

When something bad happens at work, I often feel powerless to do anything about it.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Slightly Disagree

Slightly Agree

Agree

Strongly Agree



## #2. DRIVE FOR SERVICE

Maintaining a positive, “can-do” attitude, showing compassion for others, taking proactive steps to delight customers, and seeking new ways to please customers begins with an internal drive to serve others. Assessments can measure the emotional profiles of candidates and compare them to norms for successful service employees. The sample assessment below asks candidates to indicate which emotions they have felt more during the last month.

|     |          |                    |                 |               |               |                 |                    |
|-----|----------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 001 | Cheerful |                    |                 |               |               | Strong          |                    |
|     |          | Significantly more | Moderately more | Somewhat more | Somewhat more | Moderately more | Significantly more |

  

|     |           |                    |                 |               |               |                 |                    |
|-----|-----------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 002 | Delighted |                    |                 |               |               | Inspired        |                    |
|     |           | Significantly more | Moderately more | Somewhat more | Somewhat more | Moderately more | Significantly more |

[Assessments](#) can also gauge a candidate’s willingness to meet customer needs and how they will respond to unpleasant customer encounters. The sample item below, as part of a larger assessment, will discontinue candidates who are unlikely to consistently provide experiences that build customer loyalty.

|     |  |          |                   |                |       |                |
|-----|--|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| 013 | Out-of-the-ordinary customer requests cause many problems. |          |                   |                |       |                |
|     | Strongly Disagree  | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |



### #3. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The ability to understand the feelings and perspective of others is foundational to customer service. Emotionally intelligent employees use this understanding to guide how they interact with customers and to hopefully gain the desired response from customers. Emotional intelligence not only improves service quality, but also reduces the amount of stress a frontline service employee may experience. Because ambiguous, rude, or uncivil customer behaviors are prevalent in customer service work, emotional intelligence makes interpreting these interactions easier and the job less stressful. Importantly, assessments can measure not only *if* candidates will deliver appropriate customer service, but whether they will use an effective strategy. The sample items below measure how a candidate will deliver the concern and friendly emotional responses required by the situation. As part of a larger test and collection of scenarios it is possible to determine how well a candidate will respond to the stress of the job.

In customer service, successful performance requires showing specific emotions and often requires you to be pleasant and enthusiastic, even when you may not be feeling those emotions. The following looks at actions you use to display appropriate emotions at work.

You have a long line of customers that need attention. It's essential you satisfy each customer's needs as quickly as possible while doing your job well. One customer is angry about a delay in service. She has made negative statements about your company and is almost shouting. You should demonstrate understanding, concern and friendliness.

How likely is it you would use each of the actions below to address the situation?

007

**I would think about a time I was in a similar situation to help me effectively express concern and friendliness.**

Very Unlikely

Unlikely

Somewhat  
Unlikely

Somewhat Likely

Likely

Very Likely

008

**I would "put on a mask" to cover my true emotions and "act" concerned and friendly.**

Very Unlikely

Unlikely

Somewhat  
Unlikely

Somewhat Likely

Likely

Very Likely

009

**I would express sincere concern and a true smile.**

Very Unlikely

Unlikely

Somewhat  
Unlikely

Somewhat Likely

Likely

Very Likely

## NEXT STEPS

Customer service employees are the faces, hearts, and hands of the organization's brand. Given the large numbers of employees in frontline customer service roles, and the number of customers they influence daily – your hiring process directly affects your ability to build loyal customers.

Rude and impolite customer behavior poses a greater threat to employee retention and performance than angry and irate customers. The ambiguous behavior of a rude customer, whether a tone of voice, or an accusatory statement, can strain employees - leading to poor performance, reduced commitment, and ultimately a decision to leave the organization.

By using pre-employment assessments to measure the potential for resilience, drive for service, and empathy, you can improve the efficiency and accuracy of your hiring process by eliminating people who will struggle to consistently satisfy customers on the job.

However, it doesn't end there. Assessments must be a seamless part of a hiring process that measures all the qualities needed for performance. Are you confident your hiring process is selecting the best candidates? Our eBook, *How to Build a Hiring Process*, will give you everything you need to know to build a hiring process that is efficient, legally defensible, and most importantly, consistently identifies the best candidates.

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD YOUR FREE EBOOK: HOW TO BUILD A HIRING PROCESS](#)

## Resources

Thank Goodness It's Friday: Weekly Pattern of Workplace Incivility. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*. Volume 30, Issue 1. June, 2016.

That's just rude! American Psychological Association. November, 2013.

Challenges and recommendations in the measurement of workplace incivility. In Greenberg J., editor. *Insidious workplace behavior*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis; 2010. pp. 239–271.



## ABOUT CORVIRTUS

Corvitus provides a range of innovative, science-based measurements and services that tie a company's culture and core values to talent processes. Corvitus solutions have enabled hundreds of companies to strengthen and scale their corporate cultures, and to identify, develop and retain those employees with the characteristics and capabilities essential for business success and customer satisfaction. For more information, visit [www.corvitus.com](http://www.corvitus.com), email [info@corvitus.com](mailto:info@corvitus.com) or call us at 800-322-5329.

