
Knocking sovereign customers off their pedestals? When contact staff educate, amateurize, and penalize deviant customers

human relations

1–27

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DOI: 10.1177/0018726720950443

journals.sagepub.com/home/hum



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Abstract

Promoted by marketing discourses, customer sovereignty is characterized by the cult of the customer and the belief that contact staff have to serve the customer. However, research shows that customers adopt improper conduct, such as fraudulent or aggressive behaviors. While largely tolerated, these behaviors prove damaging for contact staff and could eventually lead them to react. How do frontline actors react to such behaviors, which prevent them from developing customer relations in accordance with the mythical discourse? This is the question our article explores. To do so, we use Becker's interactionism approach to deviance, and investigate how frontline actors in five organizations deal with customer complaints they consider as 'deviant'. Our results show that when faced with behaviors that they no longer wish to tolerate, contact staff educate, amateurize, or penalize the customer. This research contributes by conceptualizing three alternative forms of relations to customer sovereignty, which contact staff attempt to legitimize through internal and external resources.

Keywords

complaint, customer relations, customer sovereignty, deviance, frontline staff, service work

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Introduction

In our consumer society (Schwarzkopf, 2011), organizations value their customer relations. The importance of this relationship has led to the institutionalization of the myth of 'customer sovereignty' (Korczyński and Ott, 2004). Promoted by marketing discourses, customer sovereignty is characterized by the cult of the customer (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992), and the belief that fulfilling customer expectations is key to an organization's profitability. Thus, the customer is crowned as a 'king' (Bolton, 2002), who is always right (Bishop and Hoel, 2008), and who contact staff are there to serve. The managerial discourses responsible for spreading the myth advocate placing the customer at the center of the organization, so as to give her/him the impression of being 'in charge' (Zwick et al., 2008).

However, while the organization encourages them to think they are kings, customers often succumb to the power of the organization (Korczyński and Ott, 2004). For example, although the supermarket presents itself as the realm of customer choice, several marketing techniques constrain the customer at the same time (Dulsrud and Jacobsen, 2009). The myth of customer sovereignty seems to go hand in hand with customer disillusionment, sometimes pushing them to adopt improper behaviors. For instance, the consumption process faces fraudulent customer behaviors, including theft (Cox et al., 1993), borrowing (Schmidt et al., 1999), and fraudulent complaints (Zabriskie, 1972). Aggressive behavior is also a routine occurrence, including revenge (Grégoire et al., 2010) and rage (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009).

Because they are in contact with customers, workers and their managers at the frontline are the ones who endure misconduct the most and suffer its consequences. While the literature recognizes that contact staff are under no illusions about the myth, and enjoy the agency to cope with these difficulties, even so, it rarely challenges the myth of customer sovereignty. For example, in their work on employee reactions to customer deviance, Reynolds and Harris (2006) list micro-techniques used by employees to deal with deviance without really proposing to think differently about customer relations. In this article, we contend that when faced with certain types of deviant customer behavior that they no longer tolerate, contact staff develop responses that are not in line with the myth of customer sovereignty. Precisely, this article aims to answer the following research question: how do contact staff react to behavior that prevents them from serving customers according to the myth of customer sovereignty?

To do so, we use the concept of deviance, and investigate the way in which contact staff deal with customer behavior they consider 'deviant'. We use the term here, in keeping with the interactionist approach of Howard Becker (1963), to describe customer behavior that is not in accordance with the organizational 'norms'. Deviance is thus the result of a customer failing to respect what frontline staff consider as a norm. Such transgressions occur at every stage of the consumption process (e.g. Fisk et al., 2010; Fullerton and Punj, 1997). However, the aim of our research is not to list the different types of deviance that make up the 'dark side' of consumption. Instead, we use the concept of deviance to highlight how contact staff react when the myth of customer sovereignty reaches its limits.

We are not proposing a new ontological critique of the myth of customer sovereignty. Previous work has demonstrated how organizations instrumentalize this myth (Korczynski and Tyler, 2008), and how this has harmful effects on both customers (Korczynski and Ott, 2004) and contact staff (Reynolds and Harris, 2006). Our contribution is to show that, in the face of certain deviance, frontline actors stop tolerating the behavior of the sovereign client and develop other forms of customer relations that knock the customer off its sovereign pedestal. Our results show more precisely that, depending on the type of deviance, they educate, amateurize or penalize their clients, who then, at least temporarily, lose their sovereignty.

This article is organized in four sections. The first reviews the myth of customer sovereignty and its consequences for contact staff and presents our interactionist approach to deviance. The second describes our research method. This consists of analyzing the limits of the myth in the emblematic context of complaint, by studying five organizations across a range of sectors and examining how frontline staff deal with complaints they consider deviant. The third section presents our findings. Our results show that contact staff develop four responses to deviance: tolerating, educating, amateurizing, and penalizing customers. The fourth section underlines the contributions of this article. It conceptualizes three alternative forms of customer relations to customer sovereignty, which contact staff attempt to legitimize through internal and external resources. To conclude, we suggest several avenues for understanding the limits of customer sovereignty.

The customer: Sovereign, but deviant

The idea that the customer should be served as king is now generally accepted. However, the myth of customer sovereignty does not prevent customers from acting improperly and, upon the customer's disillusioned discovery that reality is different from myth, even triggers deviant behavior. This raises the question of the myth's harmful consequences for frontline staff, and how the latter draw a red line and eventually react to customer misconduct. We investigate these questions using the concept of deviance in an interactionist perspective.

The myth of customer sovereignty

The idea that the customer is always right is extremely influential today. It is 'taught *ad nauseam* in business school classrooms and corporate workshops' and appears 'so deeply entrenched in the contemporary marketing discourse that its cultural politics are rarely, if ever, questioned' (Zwick et al., 2008: 168–169). This institutionalization goes hand in hand with the principle of competition, which is a feature of capitalism. This idea leads firms to calculate that the best strategy is to present themselves as the customer's friend and most ardent advocate (Korczynski, 2005). The principle that customers can choose freely and dominate the transaction process is particularly deeply rooted in the service economy (Bishop and Hoel, 2008; Skålén et al., 2006). The myth of customer sovereignty is part of the new managerial orthodoxy, which involves developing long-term relationships with customers (Peppers et al., 1999; Polo and Sese, 2013). To achieve this type of long-term relationship, the customer should be positioned at the heart of the firm

(Hartline et al., 2000). This implies that firms must strive to satisfy customers and accept that they have obligations towards them (Sabadie, 2010).

At first sight, the myth appears as a simple narrative, according to which the customer has to be served as king. Yet the myth must not be confused with the facts. While the myth promulgates the narrative of a customer having power over an organization, when the customers interact with the organization, they often experience its power (Korczynski and Ott, 2004). The myth helps organizations that evolve in liberal economies and are pressured by competition to seduce customers and hide from the latter that their interests are often contradictory (Korczynski and Tyler, 2008). It provides organizational staff with a narrative through which they 'subtly attempt to direct customer behavior while also attempting to ensure that the customer feels that s/he is in charge' (Korczynski and Tyler, 2008: 314). The myth leads to a relationship of instrumental empathy between the organization and the customer (Korczynski, 2005). It maintains the illusion that customers can choose freely when in fact they are constrained by rules created by customer-oriented bureaucracies (Korczynski, 2002).

Contact staff trapped in the damaging contradictions of the myth?

This gap between narrative and experience leads researchers to stress the strong risk of customer disillusionment. In particular, Korczynski and Evans (2013) highlight the correlation between promotion of the myth and aggressive customer behavior towards contact staff. They concur with other scholars who note that the promotion of consumption ideology (Fisk et al., 2010; Fullerton and Punj, 2004) is one cause of consumer misbehaviors (among other factors, see Fisk et al. 2010 for a synthesis). For example, customers take advantage of generous return policies to adopt fraudulent behaviors (Baker et al., 2012; Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). These behaviors are attracting growing attention; researchers stress their endemic nature (Reynolds and Harris, 2009) across a variety of sectors (Korczynski and Evans, 2013), even if most empirical studies have been conducted in US/UK contexts (Stroebaek and Korczynski, 2018). They have financial consequences for the organization, and they affect the experience of other customers, as well as the behavior, attitudes, and physical integrity of contact staff (Harris and Reynolds, 2003). This has developed into a critical issue, which some marketing journals address. For instance, Yagil (2017: 1413) contends that customer aggression should be 'addressed through legislation' and urges 'organizations to protect their employees'.

Scholars have conducted research on the ways organizations could prevent such behaviors (Fullerton and Punj, 1997), with recent work using neutralization theory to go beyond deterrence (Dootson et al., 2017, 2018). Yet often we observe that these excesses are tolerated and do not call into question the customer/firm relationship. Indeed, Korczynski and Evans (2013: 780) stress 'the tendency for management to de facto legitimize customer abuse'. The marketing literature even sometimes blames contact staff for customer abuse, highlighting that often these employees show insufficient empathy (Gruber, 2011).

The depicted relational context is potentially damaging for employees working on the frontline. However, we should not portray them as powerless, suffering victims. Research has shown that workers maintain some degree of agency, even when power distribution

within the service triangle does not appear to stand in their favor. For instance, workers use their consumer identity to resist managerial prescriptions (Misra and Walters, 2016). They also try to develop alliances with customers (Villarreal, 2010) and use management's control as a resource to exert influence on customers (Brewster and Wills, 2013; Rosenthal, 2004). Therefore, we should expect them to cope with customer misconduct to some extent.

Coping without challenging the myth: Informal and ambivalent responses

The literature does account for several staff practices of coping with customer misconduct. Echeverri et al. (2012: 442) contend that contact staff 'seem to manage this contradictory situation, not merely by reducing or ignoring it but instead accepting the conflict and trying to resolve it'. Reynolds and Harris (2006) described the informal tactics used by contact staff before, during, and after the interaction. Most of them pertain to the way contact staff deal with conflict on an emotional level (e.g. mental preparation before work, consuming drugs, etc.). Sayers and Fachira (2015) stress that hairdressers use an online forum to exchange stories about difficult customers and share practices for handling them. At a more managerial level, managers tend also to develop ad hoc practices to deal with these behaviors (Harris and Daunt, 2013). Frontline actors then seem to experience an ambivalent situation where, although informally reacting to the damaging consequences of the myth, they do not challenge it (hence the customer representation as sovereign). They 'walk a fine line' to constantly preserve a compromise within the service triangle (Korczyński, 2002).

Accordingly, workers portray customers in more nuanced ways. Bolton and Houlihan (2005) show how contact staff in a call center build a complex customer representation that goes beyond the mythical sovereign. In the same vein, Rosenthal and Peccei (2006) stress that service agents of an administration categorize customers on the basis of both positive and negative features, 'encompassing diverse criteria such as capacity for aggression, gratitude and social status and age' (2006: 1633). In a later article, they depicted the construction of customer as 'a complex interaction of narratives of customer sovereignty and control' (Rosenthal and Peccei, 2007: 201). However, in situations of exposure to customer abuse, the complexity and ambivalence of customer representation actually tends to be reduced to an alternative between either a 'good' or a 'bad' customer. As Gabriel (2008: 186) argues, 'splitting emerges as one of the crucial defenses through which people seek to cope with such ambivalence. Splitting exacerbates positive and negative images and fantasies by keeping them apart'.

Korczyński's (2003) study of a call center illustrates this process of splitting within a community of coping, which eventually leads workers to call customers 'the biggest scammers'. In a similar fashion, Cova et al. (2016) account for a 'demonization' process of customers that did not match the 'right' customer profile, according to the employees of a biker insurance company, who wanted to stick to the traditional values of the company, and distributed customers in a binary fashion. 'Demonized' customers were a 'great source of anger' for many employees, but the latter's reaction remained ambiguous. Just as some of them wondered if they could teach unethical customers the appropriate values of biking, management put an end to the question by opting for diversification – they

would target this new type of customer. Consequently, some researchers contend that frontline employees are trapped within this binary approach to customers resulting from the contradictions of the myth of customer sovereignty: as Korczynski (2009: 74) states, they keep making sense of the latter as 'our friend, the enemy'.

Where is the red line and when do contact staff stop treating the customer as sovereign?

So far, research has accounted for a situation wherein customer behavior itself, though inappropriate and damaging, is not called into question. Frontline actors' responses to deviant customers, as represented in the literature, are principally characterized by informal practices, with no radical, ideological challenge to the sovereign customer figure. Specifically, the scholars do not analyze these practices in relation to the organizational resources that may be available to workers (or else they point to a situation of a lack of resources). Moreover, they only marginally question the basis of the myth – the representation of the customer as sovereign. The authors focus on the very ambiguous relationship between workers and the customer – our friend, the enemy – without showing any legitimate alternative relationship to customer sovereignty that could take into account the misconduct of the customer.

Yet while organizational actors seem to generally tolerate customer misbehavior and remain very ambivalent about it, it is doubtful they can accommodate the myth with extreme forms of misconduct. For example, a luxury boutique manager may not refund one of their best customers for a bag received from their spouse as a gift if it turns out to be counterfeit. Similarly, frontline employees usually react if one of their colleagues gets physically abused. These two plausible situations invite us to explore the limits of the myth, and to consider what happens when customers cross the red line in the view of frontline actors (employees and managers), making it impossible for them to maintain the myth of sovereignty. How do the contact staff react to behavior that prevents them from serving customers according to the myth of customer sovereignty? This is the research question our article proposes to explore.

The use of an interactionist approach of deviance

To answer this research question, the notion of deviance is helpful. Deviance has been the subject of a great deal of research. Historically, the majority of this has dealt with staff deviance, but recent interest in customer deviance has been growing (Fisk et al., 2010). Researchers have taken two major approaches to deviance: functional and interactionist. The starting point for the functional approach is the non-respect of rules decreed by the organization and/or society. The aim of such an approach is less to problematize the rules that are breached than to see how it might be possible to lessen the extent of the rule-breaking. This functional approach investigates the effects of deviance (Harris and Reynolds, 2003), including its negative or positive aspects (Warren, 2003), its different forms (Moschis and Cox, 1989), or the factors and motivations leading to it (Harris and Reynolds, 2004).

The interactionist approach builds on the work of Becker (1963). Here, researchers start from the belief that rule-breaking is not easily defined and is largely a social construction. To identify such disobedience or noncompliance, it may be necessary to further analyze the situation, or even to resolve the dilemmas resulting from contradictory rules (Suquet, 2010). Sometimes the rules themselves may change (Bryant and Higgins, 2010), or we may desire them to change (Badham et al., 2003). In each case, the accent is on the ambiguity of the rules and the fact that we cannot describe deviance as either positive or negative as long as we have not clarified the consequences of misdemeanors (Charalampos, 2010). According to this approach, it would even be appropriate to investigate the common points between positive and negative deviance, rather than considering them as two separate fields (Warren, 2003).

The interactionist approach is particularly suitable for our research into the limits of customer sovereignty. First, because it emphasizes the fact that it is often those in positions of power who judge behavior as deviant (Bryant and Higgins, 2010; Lawrence and Robinson, 2007). Such findings concur with scholars who consider that the interactionist perspective is suitable for the study of power relations (Dennis and Martin, 2005). Second, focusing on the social construction of deviance turns the spotlight on the definition of deviance, and thus on the distinction between what is and is not deviant – or in other words, between what is legitimate and what is not. Such studies of deviance appear to be particularly helpful for our research question. What is the point at which organizational actors start to consider the ‘disillusioned’ behavior of a customer as deviant and unacceptable? And how do they react to behaviors they have labelled as deviant?

Studying deviance within a complaints management context

To analyze the limits of the myth of customer sovereignty using the concept of deviance, we chose to concentrate on a precise point in the consumption process: complaints. According to the marketing literature, complaint is any expression by a customer of a problem or dissatisfaction, conveyed explicitly to an organization (Johnston and Mehra, 2002).

Complaint: an interesting context that reveals the limits of customer sovereignty

It is appropriate to explore the limits of customer sovereignty using the notion of deviance in the complaint process for two reasons. First, the marketing literature on complaint uses the myth of customer sovereignty extensively and portrays complaining customers in a particularly positive light. It underlines that, by revealing problems, complaining customers enable organizations to improve their products, processes, and services (Johnston, 2001). Organizations should therefore view complaints as ‘gifts’ from their customers (Barlow and Moller, 1996), and should do everything possible to ‘listen’ to their customers (Johnston and Mehra, 2002). The staff should ‘encourage’ their customers to complain, by simplifying complaint procedures and by implementing ‘friendly’ return policies (Huppertz, 2007).

Second, making a complaint is a step in the consumption process that encourages different types of deviant behavior. The literature lists many types of fraud during complaints (Harris and Reynolds, 2005; Schmidt et al., 1999; Zabriskie, 1972), which are encouraged by the friendly complaint policies implemented by organizations, as mentioned above (Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). The research also notes that the complaint process exacerbates aggressive customer behavior (Grove et al., 2012). When they consider themselves to have been wronged by an organization, complaining customers sometimes give free rein to their negative emotions such as frustration, irritation, or anger (Kalamas et al., 2008). The customer even acts to take revenge (Bennett, 1997) and fall into a 'rage' (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009).

Research design: Five in-depth case studies in France

To explore how contact staff navigate the limits of customer sovereignty in the context of complaints, we adopted a qualitative, case-study-type method (Yin, 2013). When the aim of the research is theory development, most authors suggest that several cases should be studied (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2013). Eisenhardt (1989) proposes that between four and 10 cases are necessary to ensure the external validity and analytical generalizability of the findings. However, Dyer and Wilkins (1991) note that when studying too many cases, the risk is that the analysis will remain superficial and the constructs will not be well founded. Such a risk was even greater here, in that deviant behavior is a sensitive issue and subject to a great deal of social desirability bias (Fisk et al., 2010; Mick, 1996). In line with our research objectives, we decided to keep to the lower end of Eisenhardt's range and study five cases.

Access to the field was facilitated by the contact of one researcher within AMARC, a French association of companies promoting claims management. The members of this association (several hundred French and international companies) share a willingness to treat their clients fairly and develop customer orientation within their respective organizations. However, when we contacted the association, some members were concerned about the growth of unacceptable customer behavior (e.g. racist insults). Without putting it in those terms, they wondered about setting limits to their dominant relational schema, that of customer sovereignty. In consultation with the association's board, we selected five member companies, with a view to studying how each of them responded to behavior that was deemed 'deviant'. We sought to maximize their dissimilarity (Miles and Huberman, 1994) in order to be able to observe contrasting patterns in the data and develop more robust theories (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Our sample includes companies from five sectors: a bank, a car manufacturer, a public service, a luxury firm, and a retailer. These sectors are characterized by varying competitive intensity, ranging from a monopoly situation (public service) to strong competition (automobile, retail). This aspect was interesting to vary because the myth of customer sovereignty is fueled by competition (Korczynski and Evans, 2013). Moreover, the selected companies do not address the same customer segments, an area where we also sought diversity, since we are interested here in customer behavior. The customer base differs in terms of scope (e.g. luxury attracting a smaller customer base than a universal public service) and segment (e.g. luxury attracting richer customers than retail). Finally,

the companies are distinguished by the variety of their product/service offering, whether in terms of cost (e.g. tens of thousands of euros for luxury, a few euros for public service), quality (e.g. complex automotive products versus intangible banking services), or distribution (e.g. a few shops in luxury, tens of thousands for public service). The nature of the offer is indeed an element that structures and determines the company-customer relationship. It seemed to us that it could strongly influence both the forms of deviance adopted by customers and the responses of the organizations dealing with them.

Data collection

A team of 10 researchers collected the data over 18 months. The rationale for this extended team was to have a diversity of profiles and include researchers from marketing, human resources, operations, supply chain, and organization theory in order to have an interdisciplinary understanding of the cases. Each case was studied by a group of two or three researchers, and most of the team worked on at least two cases. The aim of this design was to facilitate a better understanding both of each case individually and in comparison to each other. Throughout the project, the researchers met monthly to discuss their progress. In addition, we organized several meetings during which teams presented their cases to assist comparison. We used the same methodological design for each case, and in each organization, we interviewed both 1) employees in contact with potentially deviant customer complaints, either face-to-face or indirectly (in-store contact staff, telephone answering service, Internet), and 2) managers who had to deal with potentially deviant customer complaints either face-to-face or indirectly (e.g. customer complaint managers, store managers, after-sales managers).

We collected data from 80 semi-structured interviews in total. The interviews lasted on average about an hour, although the shortest lasted 20 minutes and the longest lasted two hours. We identified a key informer in each organization to liaise with staff, thus facilitating organization of the interviews. The research team agreed on an interview guide to use in every case to reveal staff sense-making in situations of deviant complaint. First, we asked respondents to describe their role in the complaint process (Theme 1). Then we discussed the 'difficult' behaviors encountered with customers during the complaint process (Theme 2). We then used the term of deviance when questioning the interviewees about the types of difficult behaviors they considered deviant in complaint situations (Theme 3). Next, we asked them how they recognize or identify such deviant behavior (Theme 4). Finally, we discussed how they tackled and managed such behavior (Theme 5).

While age, gender, race, or class biases influence interview dynamics (Manderson et al., 2006), the fact that the project was conducted by a team of 10 separate researchers helped to limit such biases in the data collection and analysis. The team was diversified according to gender (equal proportion of male to female researchers), age (between 30 and 50 years old), and ethnic and cultural characteristics (mostly Caucasian, but two researchers had Indian or North-African backgrounds). The team was most vigilant about differences in class and education, especially when interviews were conducted with the contact staff, often with low levels of education. The challenge was to get the

contact staff to speak without imposing academic jargon on them or assuming a posture of superiority.

It was to meet this objective that we chose not to introduce the term ‘deviance’ from the outset. Initially, people were asked about the ‘difficulties’ encountered with clients during the complaint process. By using this very neutral term, we aimed to bring out how people themselves categorized problematic customer behavior. Subsequently, the term deviance was introduced and defined. Respondents were then asked to react and define the behaviors that were ‘deviant’ from their point of view. Such a term, because of its strong moral association (Fisk et al., 2010), was sometimes criticized by some respondents, which then became a source of learning about how they viewed the customer relationship.

Data analysis

Our data analysis took place in two interrelated stages. First, the teams of researchers analyzed each case separately. They analyzed the general content of the collected data and wrote a 10-page (or so) descriptive summary of the case, respecting a standard, pre-defined plan. One part of the report covered the features and justifications of different responses to the deviant client behavior observed in each organization. They presented this narrative-type description (Kiser, 1996) to the key informant of the organization concerned. The latter could suggest amendments to the description of the case, which the teams took into consideration. This process guaranteed the validity of each case study (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2013).

We used the results of these individual analyses to compare the cases. The aim of this phase was to identify cross-case patterns (Yin, 2013), particularly in terms of responses to deviant behavior and the justifications of these responses. Our analysis and comparison of practices across the five firms revealed four major types of responses. While sometimes staff tolerate certain types of deviance and continue to serve a customer they perceive as sovereign, they also respond to deviance by educating, amateurizing, or penalizing deviant clients. As is often the case in a multiple case study whose main aim is to reveal similarities between cases, the result of our analysis is indeed a parsimonious theory (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

We describe those responses in our results section. We use the same pattern to describe each response and display its coherence. This pattern emerged from the inter-case analysis and is structured around the following six features: 1) Techniques used; 2) Representations of the customer; 3) Role of contact employees; 4) Role of management; 5) Type of deviant behavior; and 6) Type of organizational context. To illustrate how each response operates, we chose to use in our results section excerpts from the empirical data collected during our interviews. To show that each response is evident in each case to differing degrees, we present each response in the form of excerpts from interviews covering all five cases. In the results section, we first introduce the response that consists of tolerating the deviant customer behavior, and continuing to consider them as sovereign, thus confirming the myth of customer sovereignty. With this response, staff have become aware of the deviance, without fundamentally challenging the myth. We then present the three other responses that represent alternatives to the myth.

We took several precautions to ensure the reliability of our study (Perreault and Leigh, 1989). The research team met throughout the research process to check on progress. These meetings enabled us to compare the features of each case as we progressed. During these meetings, the team developed the coding grid and coded the practices they had observed. When discrepancies appeared in the team's methods, we discussed them systematically to find a consensus. In addition to these meetings, we organized five joint meetings with the key informers in each organization. We presented the results of the comparison of the five cases at these meetings. The team took note of the comments made, and this enabled us to refine our theorization.

Four responses to deviant complaining behaviors

When contact staff are confronted with customer deviance, our results show that they develop four responses, namely, either tolerating, educating, amateurizing or penalizing customers. Each of these responses: 1) relies on certain techniques; 2) refers to a distinct representation of the customer; 3) prompts different roles for contact employees; 4) prompts different roles for management; 5) is relevant in response to certain forms of deviance; 6) is more developed in certain organizational contexts. These responses are ideal-types, developed from our comparison of the cases. None of them is associated with any one case; they were present to differing degrees in each organization. Table 1 summarizes the features of each response.

Tolerating deviance

A first response is to tolerate the existence of deviant behavior in the course of the claim. It is a question of letting the customer do as he or she pleases, of not questioning his or her sovereignty in order to adhere to a marketing logic: *'we are merchants. We must never forget that. Merchants, grocers, poets (. . .). We have to keep this class and intelligence in the exchanges we have with customers'* (Store Manager, Luxury).

Tolerance based on marketing logic. The objective of such a response is very clearly to transform a lack of reaction to deviance into a vector for customer satisfaction and loyalty. In order to justify using this response, the actors tend either to refrain from qualifying the behavior as deviant, or to minimize it, based on a marketing calculation: *'the amount of unusable returned goods is 3% of the amount of advertising. Except that the customer is here. He trusts us, and has come back to us. So if I can make him understand that if he's wrong or if we're wrong, that we'll own up to that, I'll start a veritable loyalty policy (. . .). So, the idea is to say to yourself: it does cost money. What does it cost compared to what it brings in?'* (Store Manager, Retail).

Tolerance adapted to customer kings. Tolerance is clearly based on a representation of the customer as king: *'the first major teaching tenet is that the customer is always right. That we get paid for the relationship we have with him, and he doesn't'* (Store Manager, Retail). The customer is considered here to have the preponderant role: *'It is we who owe the customer recognition, not the other way around'* (Customer Service Director, Public

Table 1. Types of responses to deviant complaints.

	Tolerating	Educating	Amateurizing	Penalizing
Definition of response	Satisfy and retain customer	Teach customer the rules of customer relations	Show customers the limits of their knowledge	Sanction certain customer behaviors
Techniques used	Marketing calculation	Customer training: scripts, posters etc.	Professionals accumulating knowledge	Regulatory framework
Representation of customer	Customer is king	Customer is ignorant	Customer is incompetent	Customer is at fault
Role of contact employees	Accept everything from the customer	Explain the rules to the customer	Appeal to an expert	Notify and document
Role of management	Value the customer orientation	Revise the rules and manage their implementation	Manage expertise escalation	Support and assist with process
Type of deviant behavior	Minor deviances (e.g. late return of products)	Frequent deviances (e.g. incivilities)	Complex deviances (e.g. poor maintenance)	Severe deviances (e.g. physical aggression)
Feature of organizational context	Degree of competition (e.g. Retail)	Mass market and specific segment (e.g. public service)	Technical offer and customer engagement (e.g. automotive)	Monitoring and punishment capacity (e.g. bank)

Services). It can lead to justifying a customer's actions even when they go too far. This is illustrated by the story of this ambivalent cashier, who stigmatizes a customer's aggressiveness following a name error on the invoice, while at the same time finding excuses for it: *'I take out the invoice and everything, and then he starts telling me, "But you're too stupid . . . you can't write! You're really a mongoloid!" Then he started saying, "Fuck you!" . . . terrible insults, such as "Bitch". He threw everything at me (. . .) And it was a holiday. It's true that there were a lot of people. The guy had to wait three quarters of an hour: . . . an hour in his car: . . . he arrived at the cash register. . . he was upset. He was already upset, I think. Because . . . I don't know this customer. I'd never seen him; he didn't tell me anything at all. But he's a raving lunatic!'* (Cashier Employee, Retail).

Contact staff having to just get a hold of themselves. When confronted with one of these behaviors, contact staff are encouraged to act as if everything is normal, and to agree with the client. This is not easy, because they may be confused by a response that is considered unfair, especially if it calls their work into question: *'I don't feel good about it (. . .) A customer brings me the chainsaw, which is very badly sharpened. He tells me that a year ago, he came to have his chainsaw sharpened, and that he had not used it for a year and today it is unusable. I've been telling him for five years, the only person who does in-store sharpening is me, and I could not have done a job like that. I tell him the*

price of a new chain. He goes to see Antoine, who tells me to make him a new chain for free. Of course that upset me because it meant he was questioning my work' (After-sales Service Employee, Retail).

Management having to make people adhere to marketing logic. Within the framework of this response, local management and the complaints department play an important role in making the contact staff understand that there is sometimes an interest in just 'letting it go'. The complaints department is the active promoter of the philosophy, which is not always easy: *'The first years were terrible (. . .) We baptized the client's voice "the big whiner"'. We gave importance to the customer when he was a liar, a thief'* (Complaints Department Manager, Retail). Management of proximity proves to be a determining factor in regulating difficult interactions and supporting the contact agents so that they don't take it personally: *'for most people, in a service job, I'm going to be a bit vulgar here, but, we amount to shit. [We're nobodies.] And the clients don't hesitate to remind us of that (. . .). It's the suit that takes the flak. It's not us as people. Don't forget, I always tell my salesmen, the best armor is your suit, your uniform'* (Store Manager, Luxury). Helping to remain at a distance and show empathy towards employees can be decisive in the long run. More generally, the support that staff may give in order to maintain symmetry of attention despite a policy of customer satisfaction is important and should lead to the promotion of good employment conditions.

An appropriate response to minor deviance. Generally speaking, tolerance is an appropriate response to deviance deemed to be relatively minor. This is particularly the case when the customer returns a product a few days late: *'when it's a day late, from Sunday to Monday, we take the product back'* (After-sales Service Employee, Retail). Or when the sums involved are very small: *'When we are right, but on a very small amount, when a customer asks for a small thing, even if we are right, we shouldn't spend hours on it. That's profitability. We shouldn't spend four hours studying his file to say we are right because we're going to write him a letter telling him that he didn't really understand, and that I, the bank, I am right'* (Complaints Department Manager, Banking). However, when the sums involved are larger, the calculation may not be relevant: *'if after four years, you want us to replace your vehicle after a breakdown at no cost, compensate you for a loss, and pay you three nights' hotel accommodation (. . .) we won't do everything'* (Complaints Department Manager, Automotive).

A response developed in a highly competitive environment. In addition to being appropriated in response to minor incidents of deviance, tolerance is developed in organizational contexts marked by a high level of competition. If deviant behavior is not tolerated, the customer risks leaving for the competition: *'you have customers who tell you nothing, and by the time you realize it, it's too late. He'll already have gone over to our competitors'* (Customer Relationship Manager, Banking). Tolerance of some deviance is then seen as an argument for differentiating oneself in an ultra-competitive environment: *'A customer to whom we respond by taking back a can of paint normally sold by us but bought from a competitor; we are saying "listen, you bought it from this competitor but*

we are really nice, in fact nicer, and we let you return it at the same price” (Store Customer Relationship Manager, Retail).

Educating the customer

A second response to deviance is educating the customer. This consists of reminding or explaining to the customer in a pedagogical manner that their complaint behavior is inappropriate and has breached the standards and rules: *‘First and foremost, we explain, we take a pedagogical approach’* (Complaints Department Employee, Luxury).

Educating based on pedagogical techniques. Here, the aim is to make the rules clearer when the customer does not understand: *‘Training the customer about how we operate, in other words, making our processes as clear as possible, that’s just the basics’* (Director, Prevention of Anti-social Behavior, Public Services). Educating customers relies on communication tools, which take the form of advertising campaigns, in-store or Internet displays or meetings: *‘Our ad campaign says “let’s be frank”, and now we organize more and more of what we call budget training meetings. We organize meetings between neighbors where they learn to manage a budget and also how to prepare to take on a mortgage’* (Complaints Department Manager, Banking).

Educating adjusted for ill-informed customers. Educating is based on a representation of customers as ill-informed; who misbehave because they do not understand certain basic rules. Their ignorance can be linked to a lack of knowledge about how a product is used: *‘Yesterday I had a customer who said “my chainsaw doesn’t saw”. I told him that the chain was the wrong way around and I cut a piece of wood and showed him the chainsaw working and the piece of wood cut in half (. . .) There are people who want to fell trees and who don’t even know how to plug the chainsaw in. It’s almost dangerous’* (After-sales Service Employee, Retail). Ignorance can also be linked to a lack of knowledge about the complaints policy: *‘the problem is when the customer has no proof of purchase, so that’s the first condition’* (Store Manager, Luxury). It can be linked to the customer’s tendency to confuse issues: *‘People confuse everything! It’s impossible, you can’t mix everything up (. . .) It’s always the bank’s fault, all the time. It’s exhausting!’* (Customer Relations Manager, Banking).

Contact staff training customers. When customers break the rules, contact staff have to either remind them of the rules or explain them: *‘I remember, for example, a man who bought some perfume at Sephora or Marionnaud (. . .). He had bought this perfume and explained that he had tried it four or five times, but that he didn’t like it and wanted to change it. We had to explain to him that it would not be possible’* (Store Manager, Luxury). Sometimes the rules have to be explained repeatedly, because they are not clear, or have not been sufficiently publicized: *‘So then you have to explain everything from A to Z (. . .) Because it’s true that some sales staff don’t understand the card system or promotions that we are offering at the moment’* (Receptionist, Retail).

Management has to adapt and explain the rules. The role of the complaint department is to give staff information and knowledge about the rules for 'good' customer relations: *'We have a lot of internal training at the bank to make sure all employees in contact with the customers can respond to them calmly and explain, and say: "Ah! We aren't Lehmann Brothers here"'* (Customer Relations Manager, Banking). This can be achieved through formal training: *'What worked brilliantly, it's clear, was the training sessions we organized for the staff. This was because of both the quality of the training and, I think, the management's initiative'* (Director, Prevention of Anti-Social Behavior, Public Services). At the same time, the rules have to evolve if they turn out to be inadequate: *'It's our job to show the staff (. . .) that we have taken into account the fact they had been placed in a difficult situation on that occasion. So, we adapt the process. We rearrange things, we communicate better'* (Director, Prevention of Anti-Social Behavior, Public Services). Middle management participates in the process by promoting adherence to the rules on the ground: *'We ask local managers (. . .) to organize informal meetings, to explain, not just to let the staff read the documentation (. . .) and to answer the sales staff's questions'* (Customer Relations Manager, Banking). When contact staff receive sufficient support, they can perceive educating as a legitimate means, particularly for tackling the 'minor' anti-social behavior that affects them psychologically.

A response adapted to frequent deviance. The educational response is particularly appropriate for deviant behaviors that are not seen as too serious, but which recur frequently. Investing time in formalizing explanations only makes sense when the behaviors recur sufficiently often, while exceptional behavior has to be dealt on a case-by-case basis: *'Twice this year, we had a woman in the shop wearing a niqab veil (covering the face) and another customer announcing: "If you don't make that person leave, I am not entering your shop". The first time it happened, we really didn't know what to do . . .'* (Store Manager, Retail). Educating also reaches its limits when the deviance is a case of deliberate customer behavior, such as fraud, or when a customer refuses to accept the explanations given: *'You get the graphomaniac . . . that's the guy who has nothing to do all day and who (. . .) floods the public services with complaints (. . .) Do you stop answering him? Do you send him a standard letter? (. . .) We decided to write to him explaining that we had already answered, without making any additional comment. Then, we stopped answering'* (Director, Prevention of Anti-social Behavior, Public Services).

A response developed in a mass market context and for specific customer segments. Contact personnel also resort to an educational response when dealing with a mass market. This is the case, for example, in a public service that deals with thousands of users every day, which means that statistically, a certain number of minor deviant behaviors will return: *'Every week, there are some people who get bounced about a bit, but when you consider that it's 17,000 offices and 2 million customers a day, then it's rather exceptional. On the other hand, the little incivilities are obviously much more frequent'* (Director, Prevention of Anti-social Behavior, Public Services). Moreover, the larger the customer base, the more diversified it tends to be, raising specific educational issues for certain segments. Thus, in the public service studied, *'one person takes care of the so-called fragile*

clientele with educational tools, in order to be able to disseminate to different categories of people, including the elderly' (Manager, Prevention of Anti-social Behavior, Public Services). Several respondents from the luxury sector also mentioned difficulties encountered with international clients: *'Russians are not a clientele that I really appreciate. Because they are going to be totally rude'* (Employee, Luxury). Cultural differences in business relationships lead these types of customers to behave in a way that is considered inappropriate by the employee, who has to explain to them how things are supposed to be done in the brand's French boutiques.

Amateurizing the customer

A third response to deviance is amateurizing the customer. This consists of introducing professional third parties into customer relations to assess difficult situations and give an expert opinion opposing that of the customer: *'we sell a shower cubicle and then the customer's home gets flooded. Is it because of poor maintenance by the customer? Is it because they didn't use it properly? Did they install it incorrectly? Is there a problem with product quality? All these are insurance questions, so you need an expert'* (Service Assurance Manager, Retail).

Amateurizing based on professional expertise. Here, the objective is to bring in a professional to make a decision when the situation is difficult. The professional can be a member of the organization when the stakes are high, as in the case of car insurance. When situations requiring experts are rare, outside experts can be called in: *'Around 10 years ago, we decided to delegate accident management to our broker, to our insurance brokers'* (Internal Insurance Director, Retail). The law may also require the use of a professional expert: *'the mediator was established by a law. He is mandatory for banks, and the person is an outside agent. The bank is responsible for providing the mediator with the means to fulfill his mission'* (Complaint Department Manager, Banking).

Amateurizing adjusted for incompetent customers. Amateurizing is based on a representation of the customer as incompetent, or at least less competent than the experts in the organization. In many cases, customers base their complaints on knowledge that turns out to be incomplete. The challenge is to show them the limits of their competence: *'customers mix everything up in their complaint: they've seen something on the Internet or on a forum, etc. (. . .) They associate their breakdown with what they saw on the Internet, but there's no reason why their case has to be the same'* (Expert, Automotive). The issue is even more important in the case of customers who think they know and decide to appeal to a third party, by seeking legal aid as provided by their insurance contract: *'all insurance contracts offer (. . .) the possibility of asking an expert to come and determine the reason for the problem they have encountered (. . .) As this is a free service, customers make use of the guarantee . . . I mean, most of the time'* (Insurance Department Manager, Retail). In this context, the companies frequently need to maintain a position of superiority by putting the client back in his or her place as a user: *'when an ordinary customer services their vehicle themselves because they have seen on the Internet how to unscrew the pulley system, how to remove the belt, etc., in almost every case, the work is*

done badly: they don't respect the procedures, the specifications for replacing the parts. So in this case, I don't consider him or her as a client, but as a user' (Expert, Automotive).

Contact staff need to know when to appeal to an expert. The role of contact staff is to sort complaints into those they can deal with and those they have to pass on to experts, either because they do not have the necessary expertise, or because the customer challenges their decision: *'at level 1, they look at what type of incident it is; the age, the mileage, whether the customer turns up for an appointment; they will then make a commercial offer to contribute to the costs. If he or she accepts, fine (. . .). If the customer really insists, then the level 1 employee will be responsible for sending the file on to level 2'* (Complaint Department Expert, Automotive). Employees must also make sure they pass on the necessary evidence to the expert: *'the customer might, for example, bring back a mixer faucet, saying, you know, it leaks, you've got to change it for me, etc. The store changes it, gives him a new product. Two weeks or a month later we get a call from an assessor because the customer didn't say there was water damage in the home. But because we didn't keep the faulty faucet, we've lost the proof'* (Internal Insurance Director, Retail).

Management must maintain relations with the expert community. The management must organize the community of internal or external experts responsible for assessing difficult customer complaints. The issue for amateurizing the customer is to encourage the capitalization of knowledge: *'now we have enough of everything, we have our assessment rules, recommendations; it means that everything has moved forward. Now we have structured things, it's much easier than before'* (Complaint Department Employee, Luxury). It is also important to show the customer the superiority of the company's experts. This superiority can be seen in the jokes that experts allow themselves in showing what is reasonable and what is not: *'but when a customer asks us for 100% of the repair, I strongly advise him to go to the cave garage in Lourdes, there are miracles there'* (Expert, Automotive).

A response adapted to complex deviance. Amateurization particularly manifests itself when contact employees have to deal with relatively complex deviant behaviors. This complexity may result from the fact that it can sometimes be difficult to prove the customer's deviancy: *'A diving watch has a crown that is screwed on to adjust, so that water doesn't get in. To set the date, you have to unscrew the crown, pull it out so that you can set the date (. . .) When winter or summertime changes, people change their time, but don't necessarily screw the crown back on, and they go swimming with it. And then the water gets in everywhere (. . .) And there, when the watch is on time, the customer will insinuate that the watch has not been touched since it was bought. However, the hour had changed one month before and the watch had been bought 6 months before. So clearly, the watch had been manipulated in order to be able to set it back to the right time. "No, no, I never touched it, I never set it." And so, Thomas simply explained to them that when they switched to daylight savings time, which is quite normal, they had forgotten to tighten the crown, and that's why the water had got in when they went swimming,*

thinking it was a diver's watch. And that demystified the situation, because they felt very silly, very stupid to have stubbornly maintained that, indeed, they hadn't held, they hadn't touched the watch' (Store Department Manager, Luxury). The behavioral complexity may also be due to the difficulty of disentangling what is the company's responsibility and what is due to the deviant behavior of the customer: *'the customer's expert has argued enough to recognize that we have our responsibility in this case (. . .) In the case I mentioned, we are certainly responsible for the origin of the breakdown: there is a problem of premature wear of this or that part. But we are not responsible for the consequence and the aggravation. That is to say, that if we had changed this part at the time, it would have cost €500. Today, we are talking about a €9000 engine. I consider myself, as a manufacturer, responsible for the origin, but not for the consequence'* (Expert, Automotive).

A response developed in the context of technical products and engaged customers. Obviously, this response is particularly prevalent in the cases of technical products, which require the support of experts who capitalize daily on their product knowledge: *'we're dealing with a product that is extremely complex, and expensive (. . .). And then there is an aspect that is almost unique to the car industry (. . .) which is the safety aspect. It's clear that between a radio or air-conditioning malfunction and a safety issue, the impact isn't the same for the customer'* (Complaints Department Expert, Automotive). In addition, the response is developed when the company sells products with a high level of engagement on the part of the customers. Engagement leads them to invest emotionally in the offer and sometimes to develop an almost professional knowledge of the products: *'so we have a super chic clientele, very, very nice, really aficionados, people who know the products better than the salespeople, who know the materials, who have a love of fine craftsmanship'* (Complaints Manager, Luxury). The professionalization of clients then obliges the organization to mobilize their experts in turn, in order to maintain technical superiority in the relationship with clients and not be fooled by their apparent expertise.

Penalizing the customer

The last response consists of penalizing customers when their complaints fall outside of what staff consider acceptable, so much so that continuing the relationship is no longer possible: *'customers who start saying "if you do that I'll kill your kid!", that's just not acceptable. In that case, the instructions are clear: you call someone straight away. (. . .) Then it's up to the manager and the supervisors to manage the situation. We go to the police'* (Store Manager, Retail).

Penalizing based on rules. Here, the aim is to remind complaining customers that there are limits they cannot exceed, since they violate social rules: *'someone who says to me "they made me go to the checkout girl called Fatima", I can't stand that (. . .) I call the customer personally and I tell her/him just what I think. (. . .) That's something I would never give in about. If they spent €600,000 a year it would be the same'* (Complaints Department Manager, Retail). This approach is based mostly on using agents such as the police or security guards to enforce the rules: *'he started speaking to me really badly,*

saying “you’re nothing, you’re nobody, you’re rubbish” (. . .) At that moment, the security guard arrived, and he said “are you OK, Camille, do you need any help?” The customer realized that he couldn’t go too far, and then he calmed down quite a bit” (Store Manager, Luxury). Sometimes a formal process also exists for dealing with such situations and signaling unacceptable behaviors from customers. It can lead to the organization’s separation from the customer.

Penalizing adjusted for at-fault customers. Penalizing is based on a representation of the customer as being in the wrong, in other words, as breaking social rules. Their wrongdoing may be the result of not respecting the laws that govern life in society: ‘I’ve had discussions with commercial directors in different countries about (. . .) cases when you should call the police, because there comes a time when you can no longer manage the situation yourself’ (Complaints Department Manager, Luxury). More rarely, the fault can lie with the customer, who does not respect the basic rules necessary for the establishment of good commercial relations with the organization: ‘it is absolutely not the type of relationship that [the bank] wants to have with its clients. So we’re in a permanent state of conflict; we have a customer who’s never happy, so we’ll decide to close the account’ (Customer Relations Manager, Banking). Some customers thus focus the agents’ attention to the point where they end up considering it impossible to maintain the relationship. An example is Mrs. O., who was known to all the staff in one of the stores studied, and whom one employee described as ‘crazy’: ‘Mrs. O., she’s crazy at a point, you have to stop her in her rant, tell her, “Mrs. O., so many things are happening to you, don’t come to the store”’ (Receptionist, Retail).

Contact employees have to act as witnesses. The main role played by contact staff in penalizing customers is to witness wrongdoing and then act on the rules that authorize sanctions. As frontline players in customer relations, they are responsible for alerting other agents who can stop customers from going too far: ‘we had a crazy customer (. . .) who, because he was fed up with waiting and saw another customer pushing past him, physically attacked the customer who had his kid with him (. . .) he tried to strangle him (. . .) So the receptionist informed the security officer’ (Store Customer Relations Manager, Retail). The staff also have to document the facts that implicate the customer and provide evidence of their deviant behavior: ‘the law allows us to ban a customer from the store, but you need a certain number of established, quantifiable, measurable, justifiable, repeated incidents’ (Store Manager, Retail).

Management has to define the limits for acceptable behavior and the level of sanctions. The role of management is to define the limits of what is acceptable from customers and how far the penalization may go. Above all, management has to show the staff that the customer cannot do whatever he or she likes, as in relying on charters: ‘in this charter, you can see some key messages: customers have every right to complain. It is their basic right, but we also have the right to refuse to accept bad treatment on their part (. . .) It means that if the customer behaves unacceptably, there comes a moment when you have to say stop. And in fact, that helps store employees enormously’ (Online Sales Department Manager, Retail). The role of middle management is to serve as an example on the

issue: *'People say to each other "see, he defended us", the customer wasn't right, they aren't automatically right. We have definitely promoted the idea that our customers are not always right. We are for respectful customers and respectful staff, and that's it (. . .) And our staff like that because it shows that they are important too, and when they talk about it among themselves, it reassures them'* (Online Sales Department Manager, Retail).

A response adapted to severe deviant behaviors. Generally speaking, such a response is particularly suited to reacting to severe deviant behavior, such as that of the physical aggression of staff. The difficulty lies, however, in the fact that what may be considered serious by contact staff is not necessarily so for the criminal services that are called upon: *'When you go to the [police], they refuse to register a complaint where a customer called the guy an asshole. I don't think the police will take the trouble to call on the customer to tell him "What you did is not right, sir"'* (Store Manager, Retail).

A response dependent on the ability to monitor and punish clients. The response is also prevalent in contexts where the organization can effectively monitor and punish clients. This ability depends in particular on the regulatory framework, which may make sanctions possible, as in banking: *'We can quite well decide to break off our relationship with a customer without notice, without having to give them an explanation'* (Complaints Department Manager, Banking). This is not the case in retail, for example, where refusal to sell is punishable by law. Beyond the regulatory framework, it can also be somewhat difficult to implement the sanction: *'So it happened one day to a manager who was on duty and who said to her: "Madam, I'm going to ask you to leave. I refuse to serve you. I don't want you to come back to the store" (. . .) Well, and then once he told her, she comes back to the store and what do we do? What do we tell the cops? We have a customer who's mean to us in the store?'* (Store Manager Retail). In the case of the bank, access to services is easier to control, since a customer's accounts can be closed by the IT department, without the customer being able to object.

Discussion: Exploring the limits of customer sovereignty

Overall, our research contributes to exploring the limits of the myth of customer sovereignty. Our results conceptualize three alternative forms of customer relationships to customer sovereignty, which contact staff attempt to legitimize through internal and external resources.

Three alternative relationships with customers

Our research enriches the critical work on customer sovereignty. While the literature shows the contradictions inherent in the myth, and documents coping practices in the face of the myth's harmful consequences, the descriptions of these situations of relational tension linked to the myth do not suggest that the myth itself is explicitly challenged. What our findings reveal (as synthesized in Table 1), is that when contact staff decide to no longer serve a sovereign customer because their behavior is considered deviant and

unacceptable, such frontline actors attempt: to educate them, by teaching them the rules of good customer relations; to amateurize them, by showing them the limits of their knowledge; or to penalize them, by sanctioning certain types of behavior. Compared to the tolerance of misconduct, these responses all show a clear breakthrough from the relational pattern of customer sovereignty.

This echoes certain findings in the literature on deviant customer behavior, which highlight different strategies used to combat deviance, such as education and dissuasion (Dootson et al., 2017; Fullerton and Punj, 1997). However, our results display a more comprehensive account of reactions to deviant customers. First, we add the amateurizing response as another way for staff to deal with customer deviance. Second, for each response, we articulate the rationale, techniques, roles, and representations that constitute it. Each of these relationships actually relies on specific techniques and leads both contact employees and management to play different roles from those suggested by customer sovereignty. They are based on criteria that (re)frame the relationship and modify both the representation of the customer and the power distribution. In particular, the techniques and roles put contact staff in a position of indicating to clients that they are lacking: civility (educating), skills (amateurizing) and discipline (penalizing). Our results also highlight that these responses are not mutually exclusive, but that they coexist in varying degrees across organizations. Specifically, each response appears more or less: 1) adapted to certain forms of deviance; and 2) prevalent in certain organizational contexts.

The resources that help contact staff to legitimize these alternative relationships

To legitimize these new relationships that allow for moving beyond the ambivalent characterization of the customer (Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006, 2007) as friend, though enemy (Korczynski, 2009), contact staff have to mobilize resources to ‘enact’ (Fellsson, 2011) or influence the customer in what seems to them to be the right way. Our results suggest that contact staff use internal resources, in the sense that the responses described are all based on organizational techniques and roles. Thus, educating is all the easier to justify as the frontline employee can rely on a charter formalizing organizational norms of behavior. And the staff will be all the more easily involved in penalizing the customer when the roles of management and employee have been clarified and shared (for example, knowing what elements need to be documented and who to pass them on to). These resources help institutionalize responses to customer deviance, by providing formal criteria for defining it and supporting frontline staff.

Our results also highlight that, in the course of the interaction, contact staff mobilize social categories that are external to the organization (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2013). These categories refer to alternative social myths that organizational actors mobilize as external sources of legitimacy in order to cope with inappropriate behavior. Thus, the educating response is based on the traditional distinction between the civilized ones and the rest (Elias, 1973). It is meant for customers who are not socialized in the way the organization operates (Kelley et al., 1992), and thus aims to acculturate the customer to the organization. It involves an unequal power relationship, with the organization

declaring itself the representative of a dominant culture that it invokes and inculcates in the consumer. Ureta (2012) provides a very telling illustration of this, since in his study of the launch of a new metro line in Santiago, Chili, he uses the term 'barbarian' to describe new metro users, whom the metro management considered it needed to teach 'good manners'. Amateurization addresses consumers who believe themselves knowledgeable and aims to show them the limits of their knowledge. It places contact staff in a situation where they must repudiate their own knowledge, as they have to invoke professional knowledge and delegate customer relationship management to experts. Such a delegation derives from the differences between professional and amateur (Abbott, 1988), which are at the heart of the development of a society of experts. Finally, penalization aims to sanction customers who do not respect social rules. It requires contact staff to take on the role of supervising customers, almost like guards, and passing on any failings by customers by referring to the legal distinction between innocent and guilty. To some extent, it induces the development of a Foucauldian approach to discipline and punishment (Foucault, 1975).

These internal and external resources provide staff with institutionalized representations of the customer that can help them justify the way they reframe the relationship. Nevertheless, just as much as customer sovereignty, these representations present contradictions and are therefore subject to criticism. Thus, in the case of education, to what extent could an organization claim to be the guarantor of cultural standards? And if so, is it to prevent poor behavior or rather to develop a feeling in consumers that they belong to a community built on their product, as witnessed by Nutella, for example (Cova and Pace, 2006)? Amateurization can be the subject of criticism as well, as it calls into question the logic of firms promoting customers' skills and knowledge, as they increasingly rely on lead-users (Von Hippel, 2005), value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2008), or crowdsourcing (Bradham, 2008). Customers could interpret this contradiction as a sign that firms are only trying to 'put the consumer to work' (Zwick et al., 2008) and benefit from 'enthusiastic' consumers as a productive resource without losing much power (Cova et al., 2015). Finally, in the case of penalizing, some rules that organizations decree or enforce (e.g. banning a customer from a bank for lack of profitability) could be questioned by customers. In a Goffmanian spirit, the latter could contest the organization being a total institution, with rules and values defining what is within and without, and in extreme cases resulting in some form of penalization even to definitive exclusion.

Avenues of research on the limits of customer sovereignty

This research is not without its limitations, which can provide several avenues of research for deepening the understanding of the limits of customer sovereignty. These avenues are all related to the methodology used in this research.

A first line of inquiry concerns the data collected. Our data collection strategy, which is based on interviews and documents, gave us access to the actors' ex-post accounts and reasoning. But we do not have data on the actors' onsite practice, and the rather factual and neutral response register of our interlocutors did not enlighten us as to their emotions or their daily vocabulary. It would be interesting to study how the frontline actors implement the responses to deviance identified here on a daily basis: how do the contact staff

form their judgment in the moment? How are these responses collectively understood and then combined in a situation? What causes contact staff to switch from one alternative to another? To answer such questions, it would be interesting to immerse oneself in an organization, for example, in its complaints department, in order to study the daily practice of the contact staff.

Second, our research was carried out using a sample of companies belonging to an association advocating customer orientation. Despite their diversity, they shared the two characteristics of a socio-market economy context (Stroebaek and Korczynski, 2018): the workers were considered ‘legitimate stakeholders with voice’ and all the actors met tended to frame deviant customers as ‘co-stakeholders caught within system failure’. In this context, it is more likely that relations with customers are less conflictual, and that staff are less affected by customer deviance, particularly because they are better supported by local management. Our observations do not rule out this hypothesis and make it desirable to investigate this in contexts in which frontline actors are less protected and customer orientation is less strong. The very question ‘who makes the call about which strategy to develop and then to use?’ would be particularly relevant to study in such contexts, with a focus on how ground-level staff manage to improvise a response, and negotiate a certain amount of autonomy with regard to guidelines handed down from management or the complaints department.

Finally, our research shows little evidence of dissension and conflict between organizational actors about their reaction to customer deviance. One reason may be related to data collection: the interviews did not create the degree of connivance with the actors that ethnography does, for instance. Another reason may be related to sampling, as mentioned above: the level of conflict was probably relatively low in the organizations observed. However, we did have a few cases of conflicts of interpretation about a behavior (was it deviant?) or its causes (whose fault was it?), sometimes even between two people during an interview. Regardless, our objective of finding coherent responses led us to focus on emphasizing consensus. However, deepening our understanding of the frontiers of customer sovereignty undoubtedly requires a focus on the inherent controversies in customer relations.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the associate editor and the anonymous reviewers for their supportive comments and suggestions, which have considerably helped improve our initial proposal. We also express our gratitude for the contribution of our academic copy-editors, Jane MacKinnon and Mark Holdsworth.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

- 1 In French, 'la voix des chiants' (the really annoying voice) sounds like 'la voix des clients' (the client's voice).

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