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Emotional Labour and Santa Claus

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Abstract

Santa Claus is jovial and conveys positive and esteem-enhancing emotions to customers through philanthropic emotional management. Santa school produces professional Santa Claus actors who follow narrowly prescribed training and adhere to display rules for uniformity of delivery, look and purpose of performance. This study of 11 Santa actors investigates the emotional labour associated within a servicescape and public relations environment. The implications suggest that the performance of Santa Claus is contingent on good training, strong personal values and a willingness to interact with visitors in a flexible, yet purposeful manner.

Introduction

Christmas exemplifies consumerism in western society (Otnes et al., 1994) and is a period of traditional ritual activities and overt consumption practices. Furthermore, Toombs and McColl_Kennedy (2003) argue that consumers engage in affective responses to retail servicescapes. Overall, Christmas themed servicescapes tend to encourage multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive motivations that provide an avenue of interactions and enjoyment for customers. The aim of the centre or store is to enhance the buying experience, increase the probability of purchase and foster spending. As Sutton and Rafaeli (1988) observe, the provision of a warm, emotional delivery by an employee promotes sales when customers expect to receive such individual goodwill. Therefore, in an effort to make customers feel good, the presence of Santa in the village becomes a seasonal public relations addition to the corporate image of the mall or department store. Links exist between the service industry and emotional labour because emotion management skills align with the everyday activities of public relations practitioners (Yeomans, 2007). Thus, Santa is not a spokesperson or advocate, but a specialist public relations agent whose image relates to communication about how good he looks, sounds and presents the character (Wellington and Bryson, 2001).

A visit to Santa is part of a Christmas ritual for children and adults because Christmas is fantasy, fun and emotion-laden (Clark, 1995). To this end, the Santa actor presents an 'off the cuff' performance as a part of the seasonal ritual and the retail servicescapes. The work allows Santa actors to interact with individuals to deliver a personal performance of generosity and happiness that satisfy visitor's desires to participate in a time-honoured ritual and cultural socialisation. Little research investigates the Santa actor's attitude and beliefs toward the role as a performer within this servicescape. This paper introduces concepts of emotional labour, acting rules, emotional management and uses the Chu and Murrmann (2006) Hospitality Emotional Labor Scale (HELs) to measure the actors' emotive dissonance and emotive effort. Since the role is an individual performance, open ended questions allowed opportunity for the actors to express their thoughts and practices in relation to the role attributes, the topics of conversations with visitors and making bargains about naughty and nice issues. In doing so, this paper relates these management and servicescape elements to the Santa actors training and rituals that enables delivery of emotional and social satisfactions to visitors. The survey contained a number of topics that concern emotional labour and implications of training issues, therefore the focus of this paper is on those items that relate to the actor's beliefs about the job, the conversations with visitors and making bargains about naughty and nice issues.

Emotional Labour, Rules, Acting and Emotion Management

According to Chu and Murrmann (2006), emotional labour is the degree of manipulation of one's inner feelings or outward behaviour in order to display the appropriate emotion in response to rules or occupational norms. Jobs requiring emotional labour are face-to-face or have voice contact; the employee is required to produce a particular emotional state in others and since the workers are hired to produce these feelings, the employer exercises some control over the emotional activities of employees (Wallace and Wolf, 1995). A job-focus approach relates to physical work demands such as frequency of customer interactions and expectations for continual expression of certain emotions (Morris and Feldman, 1996). Employee-focus refers to meeting work demands through modifying their expressions and emotional effort (Chu and Murrmann, 2006). Both job focus and individual employee characteristics contribute levels of stress (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002) or emotional dissonance when the prescribed expressions differ from a worker's true feelings (Morris and Feldman, 1996).

The terms feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983) or display rules (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995) refer to a culturally defined script for appropriate feeling, and the emotional labor necessary to bring one's feelings in line with these scripts. While organizational forces appear to shape and channel emotions or expressions of emotionality, an individual learns certain, yet flexible rules for managing feelings based on their personal style and personality. Emotional burn-out, dissonance and low job satisfaction stem from role ambiguity, role conflict and poor employee-job fit (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Organizations provide internal training to teach and remind workers to convey positive and esteem-enhancing emotions to customers. Employees act out an organization's display rules through surface acting, deep acting or genuine acting (Chu and Murrmann, 2006). Surface acting suggests that an employee fakes the affective display without shaping inner feelings to ensure job security. Surface acting encourages increased stress, emotional exhaustion and a sense of inaccuracy (Grandey, 2003). In deep acting, the actor does not try to seem happy or sad, but spontaneously expresses real, self-induced feelings (Hochschild, 1983). Deep acting aligns with the individual's values and feelings, reduces stress and increases a sense of personal accomplishment (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). The commitment level to display rules means individuals either surface act, deep act, or to deliver positive, genuine acting delivery (Gosserand and Diefendorff, 2005).

Bolton, (2003) provides a framework of four different types of emotion management in the workplace. *Pecuniary management* expects customer satisfaction occurs through presentation of the desirable corporate image (Bolton, 2005). Here, commerciality and materialism leads to conflict and resistance by the actor. *Prescriptive management* pertains to occasions where management can direct an employee's emotion but, there is a stronger obligation to professional rules of conduct (Bolton, 2005). *Presentational management* which follows general social rules learned through society and culture, rather than the prescribed display rules of an organization. With commitment to societal rules, there is a reduction of cynicism and an increase of positive self identity. Callaghan and Thompson (2002) maintain that the workplace of service interactions also creates reward experiences, emotional satisfaction and enjoyment through humour, compassion and humanity. Such a view compliments the *Philanthropic management* type. The actors give an extra emotional gift during a social exchange in the workplace (Bolton, 2005). Here, the actor retains a sense of self and control of emotion while following or negotiating a path through an organization's rules (Callaghan

and Thompson, 2002). Ultimately, all four types move along continuums between inner and outer self, spontaneity and rule-bound as well as instinct and performance (Bolton, 2005).

Organizations provide internal training about feeling rules to teach, and remind, workers to convey positive and esteem-enhancing emotions to customers. As an example, Disney theme parks rely on service roles to interact with and bring guests into a fantasy world. Disney characters complement these service roles. In the original animations, many characters have no voice; others have limited vocabulary or singularly unique voices where any variations would take away the integrity of the portrayed character. The character actors must communicate non-verbally to guests and thus reinforce the brand image through visual effects rather than a spoken communications exchange (Disney College Program, 2008). Whilst Santa is human and fictional entertainment character, the actor retains a persona influenced by their personality and values (Thompson and Hickey, 1989) and those ritual interactions.

Santa Roles, Rituals and Training

The majority of Santa placements are the responsibility of labour hire organizations who offer well trained, capable, competent and responsible Santa actors on contract or casual rosters. Political correctness, children's rights and protection issues together with personal values and expectations mean Santa school is mandatory for all Santa actors. Topics include identification and responses to a broad spectrum of issues and situations likely to arise during a visit, an expected code of responsibility and conduct along with workplace health and safety instruction. Attending Santa school reinforces a standard story of Santa and Christmas that, together with dress and preparation procedures, attempts to ensure a uniform presentation and performance of the Santa character. There are specific conditions imposed on Santa that the actor should never break character and having arguments or opinions about politics, religion and life are out of character. Santa school training mediates the personality, experience and values of the Santa actor yet, allows the ultimate discretion to create, improvise and deliver an appropriate performance to all visitors. Santa verbally and spontaneously interacts with every individual visitor (Thompson and Hickey, 1989).

Each visit is a unique, personal conversation about the child's own achievements or stories along with the expected Santa patter about the North Pole, Rudolph and Christmas. These conversations can include family problems, loss or illness of kin or pets and some visitors are hearing or vision impaired and intellectually disabled children or adults. There are also children in alternative care, single parent families and economically disadvantaged families. Thus, Santa puts social inclusion into practice in that everyone from the most marginalized in society to those of influence visit Santa Claus. With such a spectrum of visitors, the Santa actor requires independence of thought and action to address all possible variations of topics and ages of visitors. In addition, the training stipulates that Santa never makes promises and does not sell, yet he must know the attributes of current popular toys in order to appear authentic.

According to Goffman (1961), the concept of a role is a bundle of obligatory activity with specific characteristics and expectations as to the enactment of the role. Such activity relies upon participants monitoring and regulating their own and others' conduct in order to achieve the visitor's emotional and satisfying involvement. When Santa actors are comfortable with their regular roles, it takes very little effort to shape feelings as they are close to expressing their true feelings. From the visitors' perspective, a family ritual is an oft repeated, highly stylised cultural performance with formal structure and symbolic behaviour (Pleck, 2000).

There is, as in all rituals, a prescribed format when visiting Santa; the approach and greeting comes first, then exploration of gift expectations, a broad, brief chat, the optional photograph and the farewell. Parents and children come to the visit with their own scripts expect to share desires and expectations about gifts, what they will leave out for Santa, sometimes deliver a letter to Santa and generally contribute to the unique performance.

Method

The majority of Santa actors have assignments across three or four alternative sites. Thus, each Santa has exposure to different demographic, values and behaviour of visitor segments. The instrument was a pen and paper approach that sought some demographic data, provided opportunities to add personal comments together with some likert-style ranking questions (from 1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree). Statements and comments about Christmas and Santa found in both the academic literature and popular press contributed to the ranking questions. The adapted version of the HELS necessitated the substitution of visitors for the word customers and thus retained a similar intent of the original items.

Results

This is an exploratory study; consequently, eleven completed surveys (a return rate of 37%) are representative of those actors within a niche community. There is a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds across white collar employment, blue collar jobs or the arts orientated students, script and play writers. The eldest respondent was born in 1939 and the youngest in 1963. Only two of the actors were in their first year; five between one and six years; and one each at 10, 12, 20 and 22 years of Santa service. The small sample size, necessitated t tests for the scaled questions segments with a content analysis and a count of response categories for the open ended questions. Both authors agreed with the categorization of the themes for each of the open-ended responses.

The first series of 11 ranking questions sought responses to a simple statement “Being Santa is about:-”. This section relates to the actor’s beliefs about the job; the concepts of people and socializing are dominant. Of note is the low ranking of money earned and treating the Santa season as a fill in job. Open ended responses for what do you like about being Santa provided 32 responses across Christmas, families and children as well as 11 self worth statements. The most responses covered the goodwill and excitement of Christmas with the actors being a part of the Christmas tradition and proud of their contribution to the season’s festivities. Personal positives refer to the respect shown to the actor and the accompanying sense of self worth. Santa actors agree that the perceived self image represents unselfish giving and sharing, being a change agent, or an avenue of theatre. The dislikes category features image problems where the press and media try to make Santa controversial or a scapegoat.

The 11 items of the HELS *dissonance* measure had a calculated mean of 2.39 and the eight items in the *emotional effort* had a mean of 2.82. A two samples t test returned a significant difference ($t=-3.509$, $df 10$, $t=0.006$) at a 99% confidence level. One additional question concerned improvisation in interactions with visitors and the mean of the responses was 4.0 (StDev 1.26). In the emotive dissonance measure, surface and genuine acting are at opposite ends of a continuum that is indicative of the alignment between an employee’s expressed emotions and true feelings (Chu and Murrmann, 2006). On the other hand, emotion regulation or effort occurs when workers attempt to modify their expressions in order to meet work demands or dictates. Therefore, low scores on the dissonance measure tend towards genuine

acting and in association with effort would indicate that Santa actors appear not to fake emotions or a good mood and shows the same feelings that they have on the inside. Apart from the expectations of traditional gift requests and responses, visitors generally expect a personalized visit. There were 44 comments covering conversation topics that included the child's likes and dislikes; their achievements and activities such as sports, swimming and what games they play or talk generally about school or kindergarten. Christmas accounted for 17 statements about where to leave presents and the Christmas tree. Other minor topics covered holidays, food and toys. The topics of conversation illustrate the actors' extent of freedom to improvise and deliver outside of prescribed rules.

Another set of open responses canvassed naughty and nice issues and behavioral bargains. *Checking the list twice, seeing if you are naughty or nice* is a ritual socializing statement. Many parents attempt to use Santa as a third-party adjudicator of children's behaviour. Thirty-two responses contributed to a no pressure category and 20 comments related to expected tasks and behaviors. Santa actors appear to differ over naughty or nice issues and the polarization illustrates the influence of personal values in the performance of the role. One side ignores such issues and argues that Santa does not tell children how to behave; instilling morals and behaviors is a parent's role. Consequently, there is no pressure to be good, go to bed early or help parents. Also, there are Santa actors who believe gifts are superficially contingent on behaviors and encourage bargains between Santa and the child. One Santa offered five rules for being good: brush teeth, eat fruit and vegetables, keep their room tidy, obey parents and no fighting. Such diverse views illustrate the influence of personal values and ethics in the delivery of the Santa performance.

Discussion

Santa actors meet the three criteria of Wallace and Wolf (1995) and there are job and employee-focused elements of emotional labour associated with this role. In line with the training instructions, the actors never promise a specific gift; however, the actors modify their generosity beliefs in order to meet work demands to offer no promises. Santa actors encounter a range of social, physical, health, emotional and psychological issues during their shift. Yet, while they may differ on morality basis, they are comfortable with their roles and can offer a positive, affective delivery because they have a high commitment to display rules and philanthropic performance and are close to expressing their true feelings because they enjoy socialising with the visitors.

Conclusion

Santa school produces professional Santa Claus actors who follow narrowly prescribed training and conduct rules to deliver uniformity of look and purpose of performance as a public relations exercise. Yet, all Santa actors have their favourite stories, expressions and platitudes; they enjoy the freedom to improvise, to embrace deep acting, tend toward genuine acting and pursue a philanthropic style of emotional management. Sounds of laughter in the servicescape encourage interactions and enjoyment for customers. Being a good Santa does influence positive emotions in visitors and the passing-by public. Future research possibilities include consumer behaviour topics such as the motivations to visit Santa and the traditional photograph with Santa Claus. It is an uplifting experience to briefly enter a person life and bring happiness to them and receive heartfelt thanks for being patient, thoughtful and considerate. For many actors, this is their celebration of Christmas; their gift giving is not of trinkets and baubles but a generosity of character, doing something special and holding a

belief that they bring enjoyment, dreaming and fantasy to the community at large, while thoroughly enjoying the role of public relations and servicescape interactions.

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